

Content-oriented English Teaching

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Introduction

The integration of foreign language learning and content-based area learning is an important consideration in the field of foreign language pedagogy today. What is needed in English teaching at secondary schools in Japan today is a way of going beyond the bounds of a language-oriented communicative type of English teaching and learning.

This paper investigates some possible ways in which both content-based area instruction and foreign (English) language teaching are combined to facilitate the students' communicative abilities of English and their cognitive development in understanding academic content. Therefore, the possibility of teaching English as a means of exploring content including culture in the English classroom is the main task to be examined in this paper. The ideas presented in this paper may help English teachers as well as the students of English find another way of learning English directed toward understanding content-oriented English teaching and learning.

1. Content and English

Language as one of the tools for communication is the basic ideology of English teaching at secondary schools in Japan. It must be noted, however, that two types of communication are involved when we talk about communication in terms of foreign language teaching and learning:

- (A) Communication in terms of effective daily communication
- (B) Communication in terms of exploring academic content

In dealing with communication in the content-oriented or content-based area instruction, the communication type (B) is to be more emphasized. The communication type (A) is important at the earlier stages of learning English, but the ultimate goal for learning English at secondary schools in Japan is toward the type (B). The emphasis on the type (A) should gradually be transferred to the type (B). And even at the earlier stages of learning English, the type (B) should not be neglected.

The relationship between second language acquisition and the development of academic knowledge and skills presents the core task for the content-based area language instruction. In general, this type of language instruction is conducted on the basis of integrated skill activities such as learning to read and write by reading and writing academic or content-related topics and subjects relevant to the students'

academic learning processes throughout their life. The idea of content-based area instruction in the English classroom at secondary schools involves the following three types of learning:

Type 1 English learning through English

Type 2 English learning through content

Type 3 Content learning through English

Type 1 is the strategy most commonly employed in the teaching of English in Japan today. Type 2 is the strategy that can be classified as content-compatible language learning, where the second language is learned within the context of a given content. Here successful learning of the content itself, however, is not the main task. Type 3 is the strategy that can be regarded as content-obligatory language learning, where a particular topic or subject matter in any given subject becomes the main task. Here a specific language required for language academic content becomes the primary target of English language learning. English as a means of communication in the sense of Type 1 should be taken as an outcome of Type 2 and 3, the latter being the ultimate goal to realize content-based area learning. The English teaching at secondary schools in Japan needs to be more involved in Type 2 and Type 3 learning models. This is the basic pedagogy of foreign language education in the age of globalization and information.

Thus content-oriented English teaching aims at bringing about the maximum realization of both content and skills necessary to meet the needs of the students. According to Mohan (1986), most second language learners do not learn a language for its own sake; they learn it in order to learn subject matter through the medium of that second language.⁽¹⁾ In this type of language learning, therefore, language skills such as hearing, speaking, reading, and writing become secondary; they are transformed into ways and means for communicating ideas and information. O'Malley and Chamot (1989 and 1992) developed an attempt to integrate subject content, language and learning strategies.⁽²⁾ In this approach English is regarded as a tool for learning the subject matter derived from other content subjects such as social studies, science, mathematics, etc. in the school curriculum. Language learning is, therefore, conducted on the views that both conceptual and cognitive activities are predominant in language learning. Based on this view, English proficiency as an outcome of this model of instruction is language-general and not language-specific. In this sense, Type 2 and Type 3 models of English teaching may be defined as the teaching of English as a content subject.

2. Content and Learning Activities

Language experience activities constitute one of the main learning activities in the content-based English learning. The basic reading activities are:⁽³⁾

- 1) Understanding the target topic or subject matter.
- 2) Recognizing the entire sentences.

- 3) Recognizing words out of context.
- 4) Developing the ability to read a familiar text silently.
- 5) Recognizing isolated words and find them in a sentence.
- 6) Recognizing known words in recombined contexts.
- 7) Understanding and constructing new sentences by combining familiar words.
- 8) Utilizing context cues.
- 9) Reading new sentences resulting from substitution of the original words with new ones.
- 10) Selecting items for word banks.

These reading activities are supported by functional reading skills such as rapid reading, scanning, critical reading, careful reading, etc. These activities facilitate the students' learning strategies based on reading and discussion experiences. As the next stage of learning, therefore, the students must learn the learning strategies such as:

- (1) Understanding technical vocabulary.
- (2) Interpreting expository style.
- (3) Reading such non-verbal information as graphs, charts, drawings, pictures, tables, etc.
- (4) Arranging events in chronological/spacial order.
- (5) Differentiating between fact and opinion.
- (6) Making comments or giving opinions.

Because the final goal of reading activities lies in developing the students' functional skills that are closely related to reading to do, to assess, and to learn, these different types of reading activities constitute appropriate reading strategies in learning English. And they can foster sound social cognitive development of the students which was considered to be one of the most important objectives in the social science. The other learning activities to support the reading activities include:

- 1) Highly contextualized learning activities to promote verbal ability.
- 2) Communicative practice to promote both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- 3) Experiences such as field trips, participating in voluntary works or projects.
- 4) Collecting necessary information by reading or visiting public facilities.
- 5) Discussion of appropriate content structures, social behaviour, etc.
- 6) Writing experiences such as letter writing, expressive writing, report writing, etc.
- 7) Talking with or speaking to the peers about the content and its possible learning strategies.
- 8) Not only viewing video and television programs, but also creating dramas or stories using audio-visual equipment.

These meaningful activities allow the students to increase both communicative-oriented and academic-oriented language and content learning in real and academic settings. Underlying these objectives is the idea that language and content learning has much to do with the mastery of learning strategies as well as learning content.

3. Instructional Principles

The instructional principles in the content-based area instruction are summarized as follows:⁽⁴⁾

- 1) A new content must be taught at a level appropriate to the students.
- 2) New concepts must be related to those already known to the students.
- 3) Cognition involves the construction and modification of theory.
- 4) Knowledge involves not only the application of formulas and procedures but also the understanding of variables and the relationship between them.
- 5) Cognitive growth requires self-regulatory skills such as planning, monitoring, and predicting.

These principles are consistent with a problem-solving approach. The approach develops the students' awareness of the social meaning of language both in everyday communicative and academic context, thus helping them develop learning strategies such as data collecting, data analysis in the content-based English learning processes. Thus ways in which cognitive structures are developed and internalized in the students are the main task to be attained in the English classroom. The development of cognitive structures becomes more important as the students advance to higher stages of learning.

The ideology underlying these instructional principles and activities has quite in common with those of the whole language approach which is based on the following suppositions:⁽⁵⁾

- 1) Language is for making meaning.
- 2) Language is for accomplishing purposes.
- 3) What is true for language in general is true for written language.
- 4) Language use always occurs in a situation.
- 5) Situations are critical to meaning-making.
- 6) Language acquisition occurs through actual use of the language.
- 7) Phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are always simultaneously present and interacting in every instance of language.

The whole language approach aims at using language in actual or real-life situations. Therefore, one important point we must bear in mind is that the dialogues and sentences that constitute the text needs to be composed of those connected content. This is a behaviour-oriented language learning and because of its ideology of language in use, the academic-oriented content is not the main objective to be pursued in

the language classroom. In this sense, though the basic philosophy has much in common with the content-based language instruction, the dialogues and sentences that represent theoretical situations and contexts need to be replaced by those of real-life experiences and academic-oriented and knowledge-oriented content that will meet the content-based language learning model being discussed here. The overall content materials in the English classroom include language functions, structures, and subject-specific vocabulary of the mainstream classes. They ensure the learning of authentic content and English that are combined to produce social and academic learning content.

The idea that the students can become competent in both language and content through the learning of content-rich and socially based learning materials is derived from the notion that language learning is but a process of language policy of the school curriculum. From this viewpoint Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach,⁽⁶⁾ for example, has enough reason to be widely employed in the language class-room because of its pedagogy that the students should be taught how to learn in the English classroom. Taking these instructional principles into account, the English teaching in Japan has much to be improved.

4. Content Structure

The linguistic input of the English language at the beginning stages of learning English at secondary schools in Japan should aim at developing the students' competence in terms of intellectual ability to accumulate both knowledge and skills, which are the means to realize daily communication in an appropriate social and academic context. The students' attitudes toward English and its culture change in accordance with context flexibility. The students change in the course of their school life and the life outside of school, and the content of the learning materials change as well: from English-oriented to academic-oriented materials. During the learning processes, the students learn to distinguish skill-oriented from academic-oriented English learning. One of the typical approaches of this learning model is an inter-subject-oriented approach.⁽⁷⁾ This approach involves learning the equivalent content derived from various other subjects taught at school. This approach is based on the idea that materials instructed in other subjects of the school curriculum regards language (English) as a learning tool to discover and expand knowledge through the exploitation of the materials with two objectives:

- 1) To expand information and knowledge of other subject areas directly.
- 2) To provide language learning with content paralleled with those of other subjects.

To realize these objectives, it is necessary to analyze the text in accordance with some frames or structures that represent knowledge and academic content structures. In taking up the Olympics as a topic in an English class, for example, the content needs to have a theme, components, and values that constitute the whole learning content. The content, in this sense, has content structures that are exemplified in the following diagram.

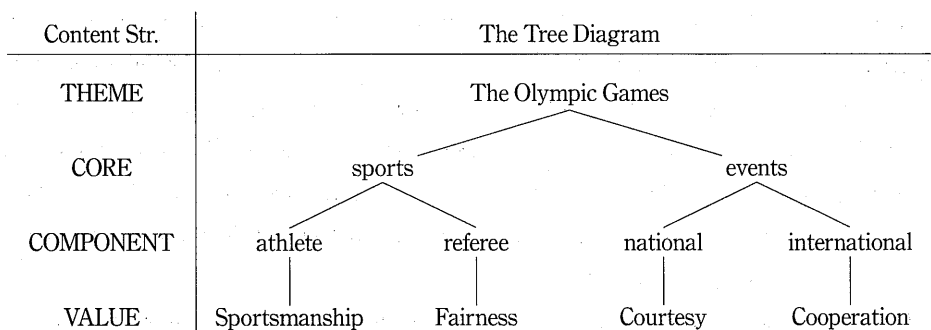


Figure 1

Figure 1 is one of the typical examples of representing a content structure. THEME, CORE, COMPONENT, and VALUE are the components of the content structure, which realize organized thematic content from separated pieces of information about the Olympics. In the structure, THEME is a representation of a thematic structure of the content (thematic content), which is correlated with the method of the development of a text.⁶⁾ CORE is the representation of the THEME in the form of socially acknowledged norms. COMPONENT is the real entity of the CORE. VALUE is the manifestation of the social meaning of THEME. Using the material as a source for reading and discussing the Olympics enhances the uses of content vocabulary in the academic subject matter as well as real-life communicative context.

The content structure also adds one more meaning to the definition of the word in the dictionary. The word “garden”, for example, usually appears with such words as flower, plant, vegetable, house, home, etc. in the English textbooks. And these words are usually used with such verbs as grow, plant, water, etc. However, “garden” is seldom used with the word “rooftop” in the authentic textbooks nor in the real life situations. The word “rooftop garden” is quite a recent usage of the word. Figure 2 provides us with one more meaning to the word “rooftop” and expands the semantic scope of the word “garden”. The relationship between country life and city life viewed from the phenomenon of urbanization in recent years in Japan forces us to find a new usage of “rooftop” by combining it with the word “garden”. Then Figure 2 helps the students expand the real meaning and usage of the word “rooftop” not so commonly found in the English textbooks.

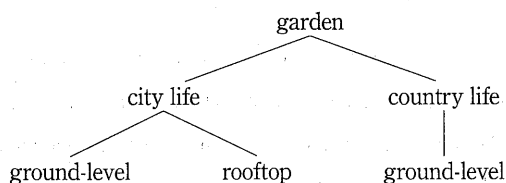


Figure 2

A rooftop garden is a new device to compensate for the lost space and greenery in the city, and it is both economical and practical. The content structure of the rooftop garden has the following functions:

- 1) The reason behind the rooftop garden.
- 2) The main feature of the rooftop garden.
- 3) The function of the rooftop garden.
- 4) The correlation of the rooftop garden and modern urbanization.
- 5) The correlated structure of content and language.
- 6) The relationship between English and other subjects.

The way of using words like these leads the students to expand a new concept regarding city life and country life from the point of view of the garden and its functions. Figure 2 shows that content structures exemplify the functions of a word in the real world and makes the content visually clear to the students.

5. Knowledge Structure

One of the ways to integrate content and language is to employ the notion of a knowledge structure model proposed by Mohan (1986, 1990). The framework of the structures contains six types of knowledge components:⁽⁹⁾

- 1) Description
- 2) Sequence
- 3) Choice
- 4) Classification
- 5) Principles
- 6) Evaluation

Each of these components, according to Mohan, is associated with one or more particular thinking skills realized by distinct linguistic skills such as selecting, identifying, defining, criticizing, etc. And once the content has been analyzed to identify one of the components, the content can be represented by a classification tree already shown in Figure 1 and 2. Knowledge structures support the content structure in a way that the content can systematically and contextually be incorporated to realize a meaningful entity. A simplified version of a tree diagram to show the correlations between knowledge structures and cognitive or thinking activities can be shown in Figure 3.

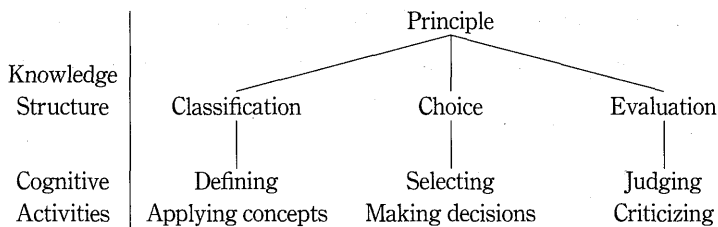


Figure 3

Here the knowledge structure offers a framework for thinking critically and creatively, while cognitive or thinking activities help materialize the content structure into meaningful reality. Figure 3 is a simplified knowledge structure model. The order and position of each component of the structure are not definite. They are flexible in accordance with the philosophy or principle of the content. The correlationship between the two different types of structure are shown in Figure 4.

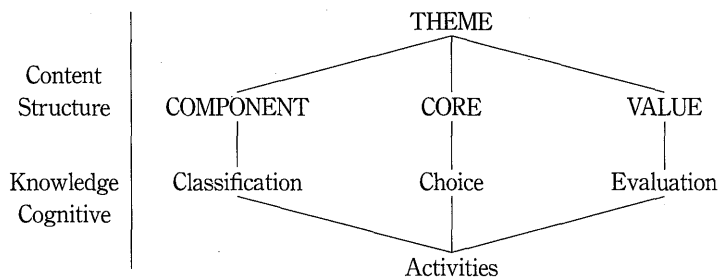


Figure 4

Knowledge can be divided into themes and topics that can adequately be represented as knowledge-oriented themes and topics which are interpreted as discrete 'fact' or more open-ended suggestions or hypotheses.⁽¹⁰⁾ And these themes and topics are adequately shown in a tree diagram which is easier for the students to grasp the structures of a target content material. The research findings show that graphic or visual representation of a text facilitates comprehension: Decker & Wheatly (1982) and Hayes & Readence (1982) found that graphic display improves comprehension, and the graphic format provides a mnemonic in a way that conventional process does not.⁽¹¹⁾ Thus it is believed that graphic display mimics aspects of semantic memory, structure, or schemata (Clarke, 1991; Dunston, 1992; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977).⁽¹²⁾ The diagram representation of content and knowledge structures shown in this paper is well rooted in these findings.

Conclusion

The integration of language learning with cognitive or academic development is one of the most important problems to be solved in English teaching curriculum in Japanese schools. English as a means of communication in our daily life in the age of globalization is not the goal but a starting point in the course of learning English in Japan. The content-rich curriculum facilitates both students' and teachers' academic and English language competence in the language learning/teaching classrooms. Developing the students' literacy and oracy skills is achieved only through the involvement in natural, authentic and content-rich learning situations. Using tree diagrams to represent content and knowledge structures is one of the strategies to approach content-oriented English teaching and learning. Based on this view, English teaching in Japan should start from the learning model Type 1, then proceed to Type 2, an interprocess of learning English. Current English teaching in Japan is at the doorway to Type 2, and the way is open for us to enter the classroom of the Type 3 model of learning foreign languages in the future.

NOTES

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