

Making Language Meaningful : A Content-Based Approach for Teaching General English Courses

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1. Introduction

In recent years the ideas of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky have become more and more influential in the field of applied linguistics. One of the more important principles underlying his theories is that “*meaning* should constitute the central aspect of any unit of study” (Williams & Burden, 1997 : 40). Applied linguists have sought to apply Vygotsky’s ideas to language teaching in order to justify teaching language as a means of communication, rather than as an end in itself.

While there is general agreement in the field of ELT (English language teaching) about the importance of teaching language for the purpose of communication, there is less agreement about how it can best be done. In both ESL and EFL environments, teachers have sought ways to engage their learners in meaningful communication. One approach that has gained favor for its focus on meaning is content-based instruction, or CBI. In classes which utilize CBI, language is seen as a means to convey information on a topic or body of knowledge. While some attention is given to language development, including grammar and vocabulary instruction, the primary emphasis is on the topic itself.

At the university level, CBI has been primarily used in fields such as engineering or medicine for advanced students who need English skills to perform their jobs. This author has also used it to teach linguistics to English teacher trainees (Crawford, 2000). While CBI may be best suited to students who already have a fairly strong command of English, there is also the possibility that it can be used to teach general English classes for students whose level is still low.

In this paper a general English course based on the principles of CBI will be described. The course was taught to first-year non-English-major students at the Hokkaido University of Education. The course made use of a graded reader and a movie as the source for content. First, some background information on CBI and graded readers will be provided. Then, the course components, including the materials used and the activities undertaken in the class, will be outlined. Finally, the results of a survey taken at the end of semester which queried students about their reactions to the course will be presented.

2. Content-based instruction : A brief overview

CBI was originally used to teach specialized subjects such as medicine and law to non-native Eng-

lish speakers, and in this sense can be seen as a outgrowth of ESP, or English for specific purposes. In the past 25 years, CBI has grown to be used in more diverse contexts, from K-12 immersion programs to university EFL classes (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Here in Japan, although it is not as widely known as it is in North America or Europe, CBI is gradually growing in prominence. Teachers at universities such as Aoyama Gakuin (Strong, 1995), Nanzan University (Murphy, 1997), and Miyazaki International College (Sagliano & Greenfield, 1998) have published reports on how CBI courses are integrated into the curriculum at their respective institutions. In addition, the College and University Educators special interest group of JALT (Japan Association of Language Teachers) sponsored a conference at Keisen University in Tama, Tokyo, entitled "Content in Language Education : Looking at the Future." The proceedings of this conference (Mackenzie, 2000) reveal that a number of educators throughout Japan are involved in some form of CBI at their institutions.

As was stated in the introduction, CBI has primarily been used to teach students who already demonstrate relatively advanced skills in English. However, given the fact that the difficulty of the content can be adjusted, there is a strong possibility that CBI can be used successfully with low level students. Yamane and Ryan (2000) address this very issue in their description of courses for lower-level students taught at Sapiientia University in Hyogo, Japan. In their article, Yamane and Ryan outline the challenge of teaching such content areas as sociolinguistics to lower-level students enrolled in an English linguistics/ communication course.

While the aims of the curriculum at Sapiientia University seem to lean naturally towards a content-based approach, what about general English classes for students whose primary field of study is not related specifically to English or linguistics? With these students, not only is there the problem of relatively low language ability, there is also the possibility that the students lack interest in English. Many universities require that all students take general English classes regardless of their major. Although some of these students may have an interest in learning English, others are only in the class because it is required of them. Along with the problem of low-level ability, lack of interest could present challenges for the successful implementation of CBI. Looking at the situation from a different perspective, however, one could argue that the best strategy for confronting lack of interest is to create a course based on interesting content. Indeed, perhaps an ideal solution to both of these problems lies in another rapidly expanding focus of interest in the field of second language teaching — graded readers.

3. Graded readers

Graded readers are books in which grammar and vocabulary have been simplified for use by second language learners. These readers have become quite popular in recent years, and nearly all of the major publishing companies have large collections of available titles [see Hill (1997) for a useful, albeit already slightly dated, review of the series available in Japan]. Many of the titles on the market are simplified versions of famous novels, ranging from literary classics to the latest bestsellers ; other titles are original works written specifically for second language learners.

English language programs make use of graded readers in two main ways. At some schools, teachers have students read the books on their own as a kind of supplement to the main component of the class.

This type of program is a kind of “extensive reading,” an approach to the teaching of reading which sees deriving pleasure from reading as a primary goal (Waring, 1997). The aim is to have students read as much as possible, and to this end schools develop collections of books which students can borrow and take home to read. At other schools, teachers adopt graded readers as the primary source of content for the class. In this approach, the goal is not necessarily to have the students read as much as possible, but rather to exploit the content of the story as a source for in-class activities.

In the midst of the still-raging debate about simplified vs. authentic materials within the field of second language teaching, there is evidence that graded readers have positive benefits for learners. Mason and Krashen (1997) report the results of three empirical experiments which show encouraging signs about the benefits of graded readers. In one of the experiments, the authors compared two groups of students at a women’s university in Osaka. The first group took a course which followed a traditional curriculum with a number of different components; the second group, the experimental group, took a course which consisted of using graded readers both inside and outside of class. In addition to positive results with respect to language ability, the authors also note :

Perhaps the most important and impressive finding of this study is the clear improvement in attitude shown by the experimental students. Many of the once reluctant students of EFL became eager readers. Several wrote in their diaries that they were amazed at their improvement. (Mason & Krashen, 1997, p. 93)

Although reading non-simplified material exposes students to the richness of the language, it also may end up being discouraging due to the difficulty of the task. While a certain amount of teacher guidance can lessen the burden, there is a serious threat that the students will be overwhelmed and decide for themselves that learning a foreign language is “just too hard.” For this reason, graded readers are now widely used in second language classes.

4 . The course

4 . 1 Rationale

As was outlined above, the adoption of graded readers as a source for content in low-level classes appears to be potentially beneficial for both linguistic and affective development. By having the students come into contact with language that is meaningful, interesting, and tailored to their level of ability, they will find the learning process enjoyable. In short, they see that language is not something that is meant to be presented as a series of rules and problems, but rather as a method for conveying thoughts, feelings, and ideas. This does not mean that the teaching of grammar and vocabulary need be completely removed from the curriculum. Rather, it is a matter of focus. When grammar and vocabulary instruction is required to help students understand the content, it is provided. Otherwise, the focus is on the story itself.

4 . 2 Details about the course and the students

The course to be described here is a mandatory course for all first-year students at the Hokkaido University of Education entitled "Foreign Language Communication." Two sections of the course were taught during the second semester of the 2000 academic school year, one with 21 students and the other with 20 students. Due to a recent curriculum change, as of the first year the students' majors were undeclared, although the departments to which they belong have been decided. In the case of the two sections of this course, none of the students were to become English majors, although some may eventually choose English as a minor.

4.3 Materials

Graded readers have greatly increased in popularity over the past several years ; as such, there are a large number of titles and levels available. Rather than a classic work of literature or a title originally written for second-language learners, it was decided that something the students would know and recognize would have the greatest potential to interest and motivate. For this reason, the science fiction thriller "Jurassic Park," by Michael Crichton (1995), was chosen as the book for the course. Because a movie was made based on this book, parts of it were also shown in class for listening practice.

The graded reader version of "Jurassic Park" is available as a title in the Heinemann Guided Reader Series. Out of a five-level series of titles, it is the fourth highest level, intermediate. As is explained in the preface to the book, the books in this series are simplified in three ways : information control, structure control, and vocabulary control. In order to control the information, details which are not vital to the flow of the story are removed. In addition, difficult allusion, metaphor, and cultural references are avoided. For structure control, sentences are kept in a maximum of three clauses in most cases, and care is taken to make pronoun reference explicit. In terms of vocabulary, the number of different words used in the book is limited to about 1600.

4.4 In-class activities

As "Jurassic Park" was chosen as the only book for the class, most of the class time was spent doing activities related to it. In order to inject some variety into the class, other games and activities unrelated to the book were also used, but will not be described here.

Nearly every week, the class started with a dictation activity. Dictation has been around for a very long time in the field of second language learning, but has fallen from the scene in recent years. 18 years ago, Morris (1983) argued that dictation is a neglected technique, and cited its potential for focusing students' attention on developing accuracy in listening and writing. Today, it is probably still fair to say that dictation is somewhat neglected, although the grammar dictation, or "dictogloss," technique has attracted attention in the past decade or so (see Wajnryb, 1990). Despite the fact that dictation is not at the forefront of the "hot" trends in second language teaching, in this author's opinion, it can be a very useful activity. First of all, when used at the beginning of class, it is an excellent way to focus students' attention on the matter at hand, i.e. learning English. If students know that the first thing they will do when they come to class is to listen carefully and write down what they hear, they will prepare themselves mentally for learning. Also, as was mentioned above, dictation is a good way to focus on accuracy. Practitioners of communicative approaches have voiced concern about lack of attention to accuracy, and

this has led to a rebirth of “focus on form” activities.

The sentences used for dictation at the beginning of class were all related in some way to “Jurassic Park.” The students were generally asked to read one chapter of the book for homework before coming to class each week, so the dictation often consisted of standard comprehension questions or true/false questions about the chapter. Additionally, some sentences were taken directly from the book ; these were primarily lines of dialogue spoken by characters in the book (see Appendix I for an example). In all cases (i.e. questions, true/false, and dialogue), the sentences were read three times, and the students wrote them down in their notebooks or on paper provided by the teacher. Following the dictation, several students were chosen to put their sentences up on the blackboard, and these sentences were corrected for any mistakes. Finally, the students looked for the answers to the questions in their books, or in the case of dialogue, for the character who said the sentences.

Another activity that was used nearly every week was reading aloud. Like dictation, reading aloud is an activity that is not employed extensively in communicative methodologies. However, in this author’s opinion, it serves a useful function in the classroom, first and foremost for the purpose of fostering student participation. By taking turns reading the book aloud, the students get the feeling that everyone is participating in the class. Discussion format activities, while allowing for free expression and communicative use of the language, do not often include everybody in the activity. Another benefit of the activity is that students are given an opportunity to practice their pronunciation. Finally, undoubtedly reading aloud can be challenging for low-level students. However, if done in a supportive atmosphere, it can foster a feeling of camaraderie among the students.

The final activity often used during the class was the showing of the movie version of Jurassic Park. Because the students had relatively limited listening skills, the movie was shown with English subtitles. Although there has been debate about whether using English subtitles is beneficial or not (see Katchen, 1996), for low-level students it can serve as an additional support tool. The video was usually left until the end of each class. Before watching the video, the students were reminded of what had happened the previous week. Any differences between the content of the book and the movie were also explained. Then, two to four questions about what they would see were written on the board, and the students were asked to try to answer the questions as they watched the video. This served to focus their attention on the most important points of the story, and also insured that they watched the video carefully.

4.5 Out-of-class activities

In addition to the in-class activities described above, out-of-class activities were also included in the course. This primarily involved the students’ reading one chapter each week before coming to class. Every other week, the students were also given a one-page homework paper to complete along with the assigned chapter. These homework sheets included vocabulary, and comprehension questions about the story (see Appendix II for a sample homework assignment). For the vocabulary, 10 to 12 key words were chosen from the chapter, and the students were asked to look up the words in their dictionaries and write the meanings down in Japanese. The comprehension questions addressed key points and/or characters in the story. The students were told to do their best to answer the questions in English, although if this were not possible they were also allowed to write their responses in Japanese. While writing the re-

sponses in Japanese of course does not allow for practice with writing in English, at least it makes it necessary for them to read and comprehend the question in English, search for the answer in the story, and process an adequate response.

4.6 The course from the teacher's perspective

At first it seemed as though the students were surprised to be reading "Jurassic Park" for a university classes. Some students perhaps thought that it was going to be an easy class, although once they started reading the book any hopes of this sort were probably quickly dispelled. Overall, from the teacher's perspective the students displayed interest in the content of the book and the in-class activities. At first, there was some concern that the students would not be receptive to the dictation and reading aloud activities, but they seemed to try very hard to get the dictation sentences correct and they read aloud to the point where at times it was difficult to get them to stop reading in order to proceed to the next person. While these aspects of the class went well, it was harder than expected to generate any sort of class discussion about the book. Because students appeared reluctant to answer in front of all of their classmates, small group discussions seemed to be more appropriate. In sum, it seemed that the students were receptive to using a book such as "Jurassic Park" in the class, and despite the fact that both sections of the class took place at first period, attendance was good and the students were attentive.

4.7 The course from the students' perspective

4.7.1 Questionnaire results

While from the teacher's perspective the class seemed to go rather successfully, of course it is also es-

Figure 1: Results from the end-of-semester questionnaire

Statement	-2	-1	0	1	2	Average
1. I enjoyed reading "Jurassic Park."	0	3	5	18	15	+1.10
2. Reading "Jurassic Park" was difficult.	2	12	2	10	15	+0.59
3. "Jurassic Park" was too long.	1	9	7	15	9	+0.54
4. After I finish reading "Jurassic Park," I would like to try reading another book in English.	2	7	16	11	5	+0.24
5. By reading "Jurassic Park," my English improved.	2	2	16	18	3	+0.44
6. I often used a dictionary when reading "Jurassic Park."	1	5	3	11	21	+1.22
7. Reading books in English is a good way to study English.	0	0	2	14	25	+1.56
8. The grammar in "Jurassic Park" was difficult.	7	13	11	5	5	+0.29
9. The vocabulary in "Jurassic Park" was difficult.	4	11	10	9	6	+0.05
10. By reading "Jurassic Park," I gained confidence in my English abilities.	5	5	18	10	3	+0.02
11. Reading aloud in class was useful.	1	7	11	14	8	+0.51
12. When we watched the movie "Jurassic Park" in class, I would have preferred to see it with Japanese subtitles.	5	8	5	14	9	+0.34
13. Rather than reading a book in English, I would have preferred a class based on grammar study.	24	12	5	0	0	-1.46
14. We did enough conversation practice in this class.	2	7	14	14	4	+0.27
15. The in-class dictation was useful.	0	1	4	14	22	+1.39
16. I would have preferred to use a regular textbook rather than a novel.	23	11	6	1	0	-1.39

essential to look at the class from the students' perspective. In order to get an idea of how students felt about the class, an anonymous questionnaire was conducted on the last day of class. The questionnaire asked students to rate their opinions on 16 statements about the class content on a 5-point scale from -2 to +2, with -2 being "disagree," -1 being "somewhat disagree," 0 being "neutral," +1 being "somewhat agree," and +2 being "agree." The questionnaire was written in Japanese to ensure reliable results. Let us look at the results for the 16 statements about the class. In Figure 1 above, the number of students who responded for each point on the scale are listed for the 16 sentences (N=41).

4.7.2 Discussion

The survey results will be discussed by dividing the 16 statements into four main categories : 1.) opinions about the book "*Jurassic Park*" ; 2.) opinions about the process of reading the book and about reading in general ; 3.) opinions about the in-class activities ; and 4.) general opinions about the class. Following this, several individual comments from students will be presented.

1. Opinions about the book "Jurassic Park" (statements 1, 2, 3, 8, and 9)

The results for statement 1 show that on the whole, the students enjoyed "*Jurassic Park*." Only three students responded that they did not enjoy the book ; in contrast, 15 students responded with "2." Although there seems to be general agreement that the book was enjoyable, it is also true that overall the students found it to be difficult. The average response for statement 2 was +0.59. Why this is so is not especially clear from the data. Statements 8 and 9 show that overall they did not find the grammar or vocabulary to be particularly difficult. Statement 3, however, reveals that many of the students found the book to be too long. This may be the primary reason why they considered it to be difficult.

2. Opinions about the process of reading the book and about reading in general (statements 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10)

Perhaps the most encouraging data (with respect to the implementation of this kind of course) obtained from the survey comes from statement 7. This statement received the greatest agreement from students. More than half of the respondents agreed (with a response of "2") with the opinion that reading books is a good way to study English, and none of them disagreed. From the teacher's perspective, the results from statement 6 are also encouraging. The results from this statement show that most of the students made use of their dictionaries while reading the book. As the use of dictionaries has been shown to be an important reading strategy, it is good to see that most of the students employed this strategy. In response to statement 5, while 21 students agreed that by reading the book their English improved, 16 were neutral and 4 disagreed. This may be connected to statement 10. This statement revealed that there was only very slight agreement that reading the book led to a gain in confidence. If students do not feel confident about their abilities, they also may not feel that their English has improved. Finally, although statement 1 showed that most of the students enjoyed reading the book, for the majority of them this did not translate into a desire to try reading another book in English. For statement 4, while 16 students said that they would like to try reading another book in English, 16 students also were neutral and 9 students disagreed.

3. Opinions about the in-class activities (statements 11, 12, 14, and 15)

The most striking result for statements related to in-class activities is that there was strong agreement that the dictations performed at the beginning of class each week were useful. 22 students responded with “2” for statement 15, while only one student disagreed. There was less agreement about the usefulness of reading aloud. Statement 11 shows that while 22 students found this activity to be useful, 11 were neutral and 8 disagreed. With respect to the movie, 23 students responded that they would rather have seen it with Japanese subtitles (statement 11). Finally, because much of the class time was taken up with activities related to “Jurassic Park,” there was some concern that the students may have felt that not enough time was allotted for conversation practice. The results for statement 14 reveal that some students may indeed have felt this to be the case. While 18 students agreed that there was enough conversation practice in the class, 14 students were neutral and 9 students disagreed.

4. General opinions about the class (statements 13 and 16)

Statements 13 and 16 provide rather striking results regarding the implementation of content-based classes using graded readers. First, the students strongly disagreed that a class based on grammar study would have been preferable. This may be due to the fact that most first-year college students have just completed six years of grammar-based study of English and are looking for something new. The students disagreed nearly equally as strongly with statement 16. The results for this statement suggest that students may favor the use of novels to study English over regular textbooks.

Individual comments from students

At the bottom of the questionnaire, a space was provided for the students to write any additional comments or suggestions about the course. Only about half of the students made additional comments. Of those, four especially stand out with respect to their relevance to the implementation of this kind of course. In their own words, the students write (author’s translation) :

Because we used something that is very famous, it was easy to study.

It was very fun to use a book in English instead of a textbook. I think that it’s easier to become interested in the content of a story than a textbook, making it easier to get used to English.

The class was fun. If I have a chance, I would like to take another class which uses a novel in English.

Although reading Jurassic Park was hard, unlike regular textbooks I never got tired of reading it. This way of doing it is definitely more fun.

These four statements are a fair representation of the comments provided by the students. Most of the students made positive comments about the class and wrote that they had enjoyed it. There were, of course, some negative comments as well. One student wrote that he/she would have liked to have done

more conversation in class, and another student wrote that he/she wanted to watch all of the movie (we were unable to finish the movie during class time).

5. Conclusion

Most university-level educators are aware of the challenge in teaching English to classes of relatively low-level non-English-major students. While the results of this report are preliminary, they suggest that structuring these courses on a CBI-type curriculum that employs graded readers may be a good way to approach this challenge. By making the content of a story the primary focus of the course, the teacher can convey to the students the idea that language is a means for communicating information, and not just something to be broken down and analyzed for rules and patterns. Because they contain language accessible to lower-level students, and also because they are available in well-known and popular titles, graded readers are ideal sources for content for these classes. Investigating what kind of content most interests students, as well as how much attention should be paid to language forms in the context of CBI-based classes, would be interesting areas for future research.

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Appendix I

Jurassic Park : Dictation for chapters 1 & 2

Directions : Listen to the quotations from Chapters 1 and 2 and write them in the spaces provided. Decide which character said the sentences and write the name of the character.

1. _____

_____ said by : _____

2. _____

_____ said by : _____

3. _____

_____ said by : _____

4. _____

_____ said by : _____

5. _____

_____ said by : _____

Answers

1. I told you that your resort wouldn't work. You'll have to close it. (*Ian Malcolm*)

2. Is this a fake, Alan? Is someone making a joke? Or is this a real animal? (*Ellie Sattler*)

3. So, you see there is no problem with Isla Nublar. We will make a lot of money. (*John Hammond*)

4. I want to ask you about John Hammond. The EPA is interested in finding out more about him.
(*Bob Morris*)

5. A man called Morris has been asking questions. He's been talking to Ian Malcolm. Has he been to see you? (*John Hammond*)

Appendix II

Foreign Language Communication

Homework Assignment # 1

I. Vocabulary : Look up the following words from Jurassic Park in your dictionary and write the Japanese equivalent in the space provided. The first one has been done for you.

Words from page 9

- 1 . dinosaur 恐竜
- 2 . lawyer _____
- 3 . examine _____
- 4 . find out _____

Words from page 11

- 5 . thick fog _____

Words from page 12

- 6 . mathematician _____
- 7 . guess _____
- 8 . behavior _____
- 9 . gene _____

Words from page 13

10. lizard _____
11. fake _____

II. Questions about the story : answer the following questions about Chapter 1 .

- 1 . What do Dr. Alan Grant and Dr. Ellie Sattler do?
- 2 . What do you learn about John Hammond in this chapter?
- 3 . Who is Donald Gennaro? What information did Grant give to Donald Gennaro?