

# Teaching Linguistics in English: A Preliminary Report on Utilizing Content-Based Instruction (CBI) for English Teacher Trainees

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## Introduction

English teacher trainees in Japan take classes in a variety of subjects as part of their education. In addition to language classes that are designed to improve students' English skills, there are also a number of non-language classes in disciplines such as education, literature, and linguistics. For the most part, these classes are conducted in Japanese. However, given the recent trend in the field of language education towards teaching content classes in the target language (content-based instruction, or CBI), this author feels that there is a compelling rationale for teaching at least some non-language classes in English. In this paper, after a short overview of CBI, this author's personal experiences teaching a linguistics class in English to English teacher trainees will be described. The class will be examined from the teacher's perspective, and then from the students' perspective with the help of survey data. Finally, some tentative conclusions will be drawn about utilizing CBI for English teacher trainees, and some ideas for future implementation will be proposed.

## Content-based instruction: a brief overview

CBI grew out of the need to teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP), such as medical English, legal English, and so on. The success of these kinds of programs, in addition to the influence of Stephen Krashen's ideas in the field of English language teaching, led English instructors to the realization that learners could successfully acquire a second language by using it to study subject matter such as history, music, and literature.

Instead of seeing language as an end in itself, educators began to see it for what is really is in the real world - a means to an end, a way of communicating knowledge and ideas. From its early days as an outgrowth of ESP, CBI has "grown by leaps and bounds" (Snow 1998 : 243) and is now widely used in a number of settings. Here in Japan, CBI is not quite as well known as in North America and Europe, but it is beginning to make inroads. Murphy (1997) describes how CBI classes are integrated into the English curriculum at Nanzan University in Nagoya. Strong (1995) reports on the development of an "Integrated English Program" at Aoyama Gakuin University which employs a "Theme-based curriculum." Sagliano and Greenfield (1998) report on the curriculum at Miyazaki International College, where students take 15-18 hours of content classes weekly in a language immersion-style environment.

Given the successful implementation of CBI in a variety of settings overseas, and considering the fact that the three cases above describe its successful implementation at the university level in Japan, it seems that integrating CBI into the English teacher training curriculum in Japan is a natural step.

### **Teaching linguistics in English**

#### ○ Basic information about the class

The class described here is the second half of a two-semester linguistics class designed primarily for second-year undergraduate English and linguistics majors. The class title, in English, is "Introduction to English Linguistics II," and in Japanese, "英語学概論II." The period of instruction was October, 1999 to January, 2000. There were 18 students in the class. The textbook used was "Contemporary Linguistics Analysis I: An Introduction" (for detailed bibliographic information see the reference section below).

#### ○ The class from the teacher's perspective

There were a number of issues involved in preparing to teach the class.

Finding a suitable textbook proved to be somewhat challenging, and the textbook cited above was finally chosen because it is written in fairly straightforward English and has help sections in Japanese. Another concern was the question of how much Japanese to use in the classroom. After weighing the pros and cons, it was decided that as much as possible only English would be used. However, when introducing key concepts that involve technical linguistics terminology, it was decided that students would benefit from learning both the English term and its Japanese equivalent at the same time. Accordingly, during the lectures both were introduced simultaneously. Fortunately, the textbook also contains a glossary with Japanese equivalents of linguistics terminology, so students could refer to this if the need arose.

A further issue of concern arose from the fact that without doubt, lectures on linguistics in English are quite challenging for most Japanese university students. Because of this, some modifications of the lecture format and style were required. First, because extended listening in a foreign language can frankly be rather tiring, as much as possible lectures were broken up into several segments with activities and exercises planned between these segments. Second, an effort was made to speak slowly and clearly (while remaining natural), to repeat key points once or twice, and to check students' comprehension of these points by asking questions and/or having the students summarize the points in either English or Japanese. Finally, in order to facilitate comprehension of the lectures, students were strongly encouraged to read the sections of the book to be covered in the lecture before coming to class.

Evaluation of the students was also an issue of concern. Because from the beginning the class was conceived as content class and not as language class, it was decided that students should be evaluated on their mastery of the content, and not on their mastery of English. This created the need to modify the evaluation methods typically used in regular language classes. These

modifications included allowing students to use dictionaries during the exams and answer exam questions in Japanese if they felt more comfortable doing so. Students were also told that if they chose to answer questions in English, they would be evaluated for knowledge of content and not grammar and/or spelling. Clearly, to do well in the courses, some mastery of English was required, as the lectures were almost entirely in English and the exams were written completely in English. Nevertheless, with the three modifications described above, the primary measure of students' performance in the class was based not on their English abilities, but on their understanding of the linguistics content taught in the class.

Addressing the concerns described above, use of Japanese in the class, lecture format, and evaluation, helped to make the class run smoothly, and from the teacher's perspective, successfully. Let us now turn to look at the class from the students' perspective.

#### ○ The class from the students' perspective

For student feedback, a survey was conducted at the end of the semester. In the survey, students rated twenty statements about the class on a 7-point scale from -3 to 3, with -3 being "strongly disagree," 0 being "neutral", and 3 being "strongly agree." The information gained from the survey that is relevant for the purposes of this paper is listed in the table below. For each statement, the number of students who responded for each point on the scale is listed, in addition to an average of the 18 responses.

Statement	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	Average
1. The textbook was difficult to understand.	0	3	2	2	3	6	2	0.72
2. The textbook was interesting.	1	2	0	4	3	3	5	0.94
3. I would prefer to have a textbook written in Japanese.	2	5	3	3	1	2	2	-0.44
4. I want foreign teachers to use only English when teaching linguistics.	1	2	6	0	3	4	2	0.22
5. I want foreign teachers to sometimes use Japanese when teaching linguistics.	1	2	1	1	7	2	4	0.83
6. It is better to study linguistics in Japanese than in English	5	2	2	4	4	1	0	-0.83
7. Studying linguistics in English is useful.	0	0	2	2	1	5	8	1.83
8. Studying linguistics in English helped me to improve my listening skills in English.	0	0	1	1	3	8	5	1.83
9. The teacher spoke too quickly.	1	4	3	6	4	1	0	-0.33
10. The tests were difficult.	0	2	0	2	3	4	7	1.56
11. Being able to use a dictionary when taking the exams was useful.	0	1	0	0	0	5	12	2.44
12. The class was interesting.	0	0	0	0	4	6	8	2.22
13. I want to take classes in other subjects (besides linguistics) in English.	0	0	0	3	6	2	7	1.72

Statements 1 and 2 reveal that most students in the class found the textbook difficult, yet at least somewhat interesting. Contrary to expectations, statement 3 shows that most students would not prefer a textbook written in Japanese. With respect to how much Japanese should be used in the classroom, statements 4 and 5 provide slightly conflicting data. While 9 students answered that they wanted foreign teachers to only speak English in class, 13 students replied that they wanted them to use some Japanese. Statement 6, however, shows that most students don't think it is necessarily better to study linguistics in Japanese than in English, and statement 7 provides evidence that most students feel that it is useful to do so in English. Statement 8 demonstrates that one possible reason for this is that nearly all of the respondents said that the class helped to improve their listening skills in English.

Perhaps because an effort was made to speak slowly in the class, statement 9 indicates that most students felt that the teacher spoke at about the right speed. In terms of the exams in the class, it appears that most students found them challenging. Data from statement 10 show that 7 students

strongly agreed that the tests were difficult. The results of the exams somewhat support this, as the average score for the midterm exam was 83%, and the average for the final exam was only 70%. There is also evidence, however, that being allowed to use a dictionary was useful for the students, as data from statement 11 demonstrate. Statement 12 provides fairly strong evidence that the students enjoyed the class. Finally, perhaps the most intriguing responses came from statement 13. Somewhat surprisingly, it appears that many students would like to have the opportunity to take other content courses in English. This result, along with the data from statement 12, provide evidence that in addition to being successful from the teacher's perspective, the class was also a success from the point of view of the students.

## **Conclusions**

Although the preliminary nature of this report precludes definitive conclusions, it seems fairly certain that CBI has at least some place in the curriculum for English teacher trainees. Both from the teacher's and students' perspective, the class described here can be seen as a success. The teacher found the students to be interested and receptive, and the students found the class to be interesting and useful.

Despite the apparent success of the class, before CBI is implemented as an integral part of the curriculum, there are still a number of issues that need to be addressed. Of greatest importance is the question of whether students were able to achieve mastery of the class content in English as well as they could have done if the class had been conducted in their first language, Japanese. Unfortunately, there are few studies available from other programs that address this question. If it is determined that students are able to learn the content better in their first language, they may be best served by learning it first in Japanese, and then have it recycling and/or expanded upon at a later time in English. Another possibility is to have students do readings in Japanese and then present the key concepts from the readings in English

during the lecture. These, among other questions, need further review, but from this preliminary report it seems that CBI could well become an important element in the English teacher training curriculum.

## References

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