

# **Effective Implementation of Content-based Language Teaching in the Japanese Context**

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# Effective Implementation of Content-based Language Teaching in the Japanese Context

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## Abstract

In this paper, we propose some essential arguments which should be considered for effective implementation of Content-based Language Teaching (CBLT) in the Japanese context. Reviewing the related literature, we compare the advantages and disadvantages of CBLT and traditional approaches to language teaching, and state the main features of implementing CBLT models. The proposed arguments are constructive for the improvement of CBLT implementation at Japanese universities.

**Keywords:** CBLT, foreign language teaching, Japan

## 1. Introduction

The process of globalization and increased movement of people, information, capital and commodities has affected all aspects of human life. International interdependence has increased the importance of appropriate knowledge about and proactive reaction to the new changes on a global scale. Foreign language capability of the society for the developed countries, such as Japan, whose language is not an international language has become an essential precondition for further perspective development in the condition of ongoing globalization. As such, when it comes to preparing students for an ever-evolving global future, approaches to language teaching that focus on aspects besides the language itself, such as CBLT or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), are becoming an ever more valuable tool for the teacher to have in their tool kit. Moreover, in the case of Japan, these approaches

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should have an added benefit of educating students about the world. CBLT is a viable option to shift from traditional grammar-based language teaching to help students better in the modern world, but what are the potential implications in making the switch and how can we do so effectively?

In the next section, the important points stated by the existing literature about the difference between CBLT and traditional approaches to language teaching, CBLT models, and CBLT implementation in Japan are reviewed. Our considerations for effective implementation of CBLT in Japanese universities are presented in Section 3. The last section concludes the paper.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 CBLT and Traditional Approaches to Language Teaching*

Grammar driven language teaching remains pervasive around the world, even though such instruction fails to entice students to learn languages or use them beyond the classroom walls and prevents the development of advanced skills that foster higher levels of thinking (Cammarata et al., 2016). CBLT differs from traditional language teaching approaches, such as grammar-translation, in that it focuses on the development of literacy and academic ability, with language taking on more of a minor role.

In CBLT, students are taught non-linguistic content through a foreign or additional language in a way that ‘promotes a dynamic interplay between language and content’ (Lyster, 2018), where language in the classroom “should serve as both “subject” and “object”. In content-based approaches, students are “learning about something, rather than learning about language” (Ritchie, 2013). This means the approaches enable students not only to listen, read, write, and speak, but also to think in a foreign language.

Content-based approaches to language teaching can have certain advantages over traditional grammar-based approaches. The focus of classes can be changed to utilise content that matches the specific needs of the context, such as content aimed at motivating students or developing critical thinking skills, rather than primarily

language development. In other words, CBLT can provide “a cognitive basis for language learning and a motivational basis for purposeful communication”<sup>2</sup>.

In CBLT classes in which content is taught in the students’ target language, the grades achieved are higher than for students who have not taken such classes, which could be put down to motivation. The ability for teachers or even students to choose the content of the class, could easily contribute to student motivation, an oft-cited important factor of effective learning (Spolsky, 2000; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003; Nakata, 2006).

Dörnyei (1994) adds that motivation, or “goal directed behaviour” (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003), “is one of the main determinants of second/foreign language learning achievement”, further mentioning that the most influential factors on motivation are the school environment, teachers, peer-groups, and the instructional materials, or in this case, content.

Teachers often think that students should constantly be learning something new, and they prioritise these tasks over tasks aimed at developing the students’ fluency in the second language (Nation, 2009). In addition, many students think they have to improve their foreign language capability to a certain level before they start to talk or to use it. However, CBLT classes enable students to use their target language to develop their fluency from the outset, an important part of language acquisition that is the most often neglected area of second language teaching (Rossiter et al., 2010).

## *2.2 CBLT Models*

Moreover, comparison of CBLT with traditional learning of language based on traditional grammar-centric learning alone is not sufficient, and it helps to also see how CBLT is being implemented in the modern-day classroom. There are three main CBLT models (Meehan, 2010); sheltered, adjunct, or theme-based, that differ primarily on context and teachers available.

Sheltered CBLT generally takes place in contexts where the target language is

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<sup>2</sup> Lyster (2018)

taught as a foreign language in the target language. This method is called sheltered because there are two teachers either working together or in tandem, with one teacher focused on teaching the content, and one the language.

In the adjunct model, content teachers are also trained in teaching English as a second language (ESL). This method is similar to Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) developed teaching English methodology or teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) classes in that there is a focus on acquiring context-specific vocabulary, and the development of other study skills.

In theme-based CBLT, the primary focus is on the development of the students' language ability, and the students are assessed as such, "the themes are selected based on their potential to contribute to the learner's language growth in specific topical or functional domains"<sup>3</sup>.

Care must be taken when it comes to striking the right balance between learning content and learning language. We cannot "assume that language acquisition takes place incidentally"<sup>4</sup>. CBLT should be a further step for improvement of language capability coming after learning some vocabulary and grammar. In other words, vocabulary and grammar lectures are also very important for students who will take CBLT lectures later.

### *2.3 CBLT in the Japanese Context*

Although such approaches have indeed long been implemented in Japan, with evidence dating back to at least the early 90s (Andrade, 2014; Brown and Bradford, 2017), the spread has been somewhat limited. In addition, Brown and Bradford (2017) state that there is still no consensus on the goals or outcomes amongst institutions of higher learning, and that in most instances, the goal is language learning, with students primarily assessed on language performance.

Butler (2005) noted that the effectiveness of CBLT, in East Asia as well as elsewhere, is dependent upon (i) program setting and the curriculum, (ii) the

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<sup>3</sup> Meehan (2010)

<sup>4</sup> Butler (2005)

characteristics of teachers involved, (iii) the characteristics of learners, and (iv) the availability of resources. In one example of CBLT being implemented at a Japanese university, Meehan (2010) observed a “Lecture Workshop”. This Lecture Workshop class consisted of four elements designed to build background knowledge for the students; pre-reading activities, factual work, discussion, and analysis. Meehan (2010) adds that despite this, students still lacked knowledge on how to form arguments. Moreover, what must be noted is that the students had TOEIC scores higher than 750, which is not always possible in rural Japan.

In addition, content-based approaches to language teaching are said to be better suited to older learners. These approaches can be used outside of immersion environments aimed at developing fully bilingual students, they can be used when students have limited time to learn, and they take into consideration different learning styles (Messerklinger, 2008). In the Japanese context where learning starts later, and opportunities to speak the language outside the classroom are less available, CBLT could be used to motivate students, teach them about the outside world, and help in providing a well-balanced language learning environment.

There are a number of considerations to make when it comes to implementing content-based approaches to language teaching in the Japanese context. For general CBLT, Lyster (2018) outlines a favourable condition where teachers are available, students are motivated, and they both have an appropriate level of proficiency. In addition, Andrade (2014) mentioned conditions to meet for successful content-based language teaching in the Japanese context, such as:

- Language ability not too low;
- Several different themes covered, so students don’t lose interest;
- Balance of personal and public topics;
- If language skill development is the aim, these skills need to be clearly specified, or students should take co-requisite courses concurrently or before taking these CBLT classes;
- Teachers to use a variety of teaching techniques and adjust to the students’ pace and provide content the students are interested in;

- Materials need to be easy for both students and teachers to use.

### **3. Considerations for Effective Implementation of CBLT in Japan**

In many situations, it may be impossible to meet the favourable condition for implementing CBLT effectively, and the same is true for the researchers in their current context at a Japanese university. However, this does not mean teachers are limited in the ways in which they can utilise CBLT in their teaching.

In the researchers' case, CBLT-type lectures are able to be provided mostly for the students who belong to special courses or departments. At the end of their first academic year, the students have to choose the courses with some different features which start from the second academic year. The students who want further to improve their foreign language capabilities may determine the course which offers foreign language classes that utilise CBLT. That is to say, CBLT does not have to be used across the whole school, and can be used in certain courses and in certain classes to great effect.

Moreover, it goes without saying that teachers play a major role in the success or failure of a CBLT course, and their background will largely dictate what goes on in the class itself. Teachers could be native speakers of the target language, with or without language capability in the students' native language. Perhaps, they could be a non-native speaker of the target language, with or without language capability in the students' native tongue, or they could simply be a native speaker of the students' native language. Depending on this make-up, the teachers may wish to adjust their instruction to take advantage of their relative strengths in a certain context. In any case, all teachers still require a deep understanding of the context and the scope of classroom language available to the students.

If the teacher has sufficient knowledge of both languages, the first language, which is native for the students and the second language, which is the targeted language, the classes become transitional classes for the students. The students try to discuss the content in their second language, but they are sure to get support in their first language when required. This condition will increase students' confidence. Especially for the

students who do not have enough experience of participation in CBLT-type lectures, this transitional type of lecture will be very effective. However, in cases where the students' command of the target language is not strong, excessive use of the target language is best avoided to maintain student motivation. This is a balance that is best decided by the teacher.

In order to improve student comprehension, teachers can try many strategies such as 'paraphrasing, examples, synonyms, visualization, expression and gesture' (Lyster, 2018). In addition, teachers can vary the pace of their speech, enunciate words, or give out keyword definitions along with words that the teacher often uses at the beginning of class.

In short, content in the students' native tongue is also a very effective way to utilise CBLT techniques. Rather than translating, essentially spoon-feeding the information to the students, having some form of summary in both languages is useful. In general, it is better to discuss the topic in the targeted language. Then this can be summarized in the native language, then once again addressed in the target language.

CBLT students could have better communication skills in the targeted foreign language, but less accuracy in grammar<sup>5</sup>. According to Lyster (2018) "CBLT lectures can take on a lecture format without providing sufficient opportunities for student's interaction". Teachers, therefore, have to be careful to keep students attentive in class and not bore students with too many details.

Providing a list of keywords to be used in discussions before lectures can be very effective. Even students with a good background of the target language may not be familiar with the keywords for different topics. Furthermore, different teachers use different words. One good way to address this is to ask students in advance to let the teacher explain the words they cannot understand during the lecture.

Changing the speed of speech and repeating the points which are not easy for students makes the understanding of the content easy. In addition, to make the class more interactive presentations, discussions, and questions are very effective. Students

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<sup>5</sup> Lyster (2018)



should have more opportunity to say their opinion, and the teacher should not stop students whose opinions differ from their own. Different opinions should be welcomed as much as possible. This process can be made more effective if the teacher facilitates questions and answers *between* students.

Students come with different backgrounds and ability in the target language, as well as in the topic or content taught. It's important to note that students come into English classes with the understanding that they are there to learn English. To implement CBLT classes well, it will have to be obvious what the class' aims are from before the start of the term when students are considering which classes to take.

As much as possible, using carefully-selected, or even student-selected materials can help motivate students. By allowing student input in material selection, materials are more relevant to the students' lives, which can lead to greater motivation to learn.

#### **4. Conclusion**

CBLT is becoming a valuable tool for instructors who teach foreign languages. In the case of Japan, CBLT approach should have an added benefit of educating students about the outside world. Based on our teaching experience at Japanese universities, we have proposed some of our arguments which could be considered for effective implementation of CBLT in the Japanese context. The proposed arguments are supportive for improvement of CBLT implementation at Japanese universities.

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