

Developing L2 Presentation Skills in a Content-Focused Curriculum

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The integration of language learning with non-linguistic subject content has been labeled by a number of differing terms in the field of second-language acquisition (SLA). *Language immersion* is often used to describe environments where the second-language (L2) operates as the medium of instruction for subjects not related to language learning (Johnson & Swain, 1997). *English for academic purposes* (EAP) or *English for specific purposes* (ESP) also describes the use of an L2, English in this case, for teaching content related to academic learning or vocational learning. *Content-based instruction* (CBI) and *content and language integrated learning* (CLIL) are two further self-explanatory approaches to L2 instruction. CLIL in particular has garnered significant attention in recent research due to the European Commission identifying it as a methodology that “has a major contribution to make to the Union’s language learning goals” (2003, p.8).

Although CLIL research has largely focused on the European context, it also has relevance in the Japanese educational context. This is due to CLIL being an English as a foreign language (EFL) methodology, in comparison with other language immersion strains that emerged primarily from English as a second language (ESL) contexts such as French speaking Canada (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula & Smit, 2010). CLIL as a means of L2 instruction has several mooted advantages over traditional, language-focused pedagogies.

It acts as bridge between a learner's language skills and content that may appear more immediately relevant to their own contexts. Additionally, students who participate in CLIL have been shown to demonstrate a larger receptive and productive lexicon, greater morphosyntactic and pragmatic understanding in written work, and superior spontaneous oral production (Dalton-Puffer, 2011).

Recent research has pointed to the efficacy of CLIL in the Japanese context (Pinner, 2013). One of the content-focused courses I currently teach at the tertiary-level is a politics and economics focused business English unit. Although the learners are all English majors, the goal of the class is to expand their knowledge of business related subject matter through the introduction of political and economic topics. I originally envisioned this course as a discussion-based unit with an emphasis on real-world case studies. Two factors combined to cause a reevaluation of my methods. Firstly, although the majority of the students on the course were third or fourth-year English majors, they did not possess the linguistic ability or confidence necessary to facilitate meaningful discussions. The second factor was related to a shift in the Japanese business community leading to a new employment recruitment opportunity.

In the past few years several high profile Japanese companies have mandated the compulsory use of English as a medium of communication. The scale of English use varies between companies. At one end of the scale is the *Englishnization* course followed by Rakuten in which English has become the official language of the company and all internal communications must be conducted in English (Wakabayashi, 2010). Other companies, such as Uniqlo

and Bridgestone, require meetings with non-Japanese participants to be in English and set language proficiency goals for employees wishing to move up the corporate ladder (Einhorn, 2013). The publicity with which these moves have been met within the media has almost certainly led to the realization amongst those about to enter the labour market that practical business English skills could be a key differential when applying for jobs.

Presentation giving is a skill that most students at the tertiary level are familiar with to some extent. However, presentations given in English have several stylistic differences from the ones typically given in Japanese. It is also a skill that can easily be envisioned crossing over from academia to a corporate setting. The process of creating and performing a presentation, in particular if it is a group presentation, contains several linguistic elements in discussing, researching, writing, and performing the content. Studies have shown that oral discourse competence improves with the monologue speaking found in presentations (Dalton-Puffer, 2009).

The unsuitability of a discussion-based curriculum for the teaching context in combination with the move towards English communication within the Japanese corporate setting led me to adopt a presentation-centered methodology for the following reasons:

- Presentations offer an opportunity to polish a skill that the students already have a degree of comfort with in their first-language.
- They provide rich L2 linguistic practice.

- They can improve oral discourse competence.
- They can also offer useful points for cross-cultural comparison.
- Presentation giving is a skill that can readily be identified as useful to their future employment prospects.

Course Methodology

The content-focused business English course in question typically has an enrollment of between 20 and 35 students. During the 15-week length of the course the students participate in four presentation projects (three group, one individual). Each project lasts three or four weeks and includes an introductory week based on a real-world case study involving comprehension, discussion, and vocabulary elements which acts as a topic primer. Students then spend one to two weeks working in groups or individually to research, plan, and write their presentations. The final week is for practice and performance. Feedback is given after each performance with areas of merit and areas for potential improvement highlighted. Peer feedback is also utilized to encourage the students to pay careful attention to the other group performances and also to demonstrate the assessment rubrics in operation. At points throughout the course simple tutorials are provided on English language presentation norms and techniques, these are carefully tailored to work in tandem with the feedback to ensure that the students have a clear map of progression.

Discussion

This course has now been running for seven years. In the first year the focus was on discussion activities. The end-of-course

questionnaires produced feedback from the students indicating that the subject content was too difficult and that they did not feel satisfied with their level of comprehension. During the second and third years the classroom focus was shifted to include some presentation-based projects. At the end of these years the student feedback showed a greater level of self-perceived comprehension and included favourable comments in regard to the utilisation of presentation projects. The last four years of the course has followed the methodology as described above and has consistently achieved a student-satisfaction rating of good or very good from over 90 percent of the participants and received overwhelmingly positive comments regarding the focus on presentation skills throughout the course.

Of course, student satisfaction is not the only consideration when evaluating the effectiveness of a particular course methodology. However, some motivational models, such as *dynamic motivation*, have emphasized the correlation between positive attitudes towards the task or course and L2 output (Dörnyei, 2002).

The dual focus of content and skills involved in this approach can help to improve task-based engagement. If the learners see worth on both levels then they are more likely to commit to the task. However, it is important to note that the selection of content must be carefully measured to provide appropriately relevant material or there is the danger of creating a classroom environment that provides neither valid content nor structured linguistic input.

Further positive benefits of utilizing presentations in a content-

focused curriculum can include an increased lexicon and the accumulation of non-linguistic skills. Particularly for learners at the tertiary stage of education in Japan, the introduction and use in pertinent contexts of new or rarely encountered vocabulary can prove valuable. Due to the nature of foreign language education at the secondary level these learners are expected to develop a large receptive lexicon. However, the productive demands placed on students by assessment and the entrance examination system at that level are not correspondingly high. Finally, the practical skills the students can accrue and hone during the completion of the presentation projects, although not directly connected to linguistic competence, can greatly add to the holistic benefits of a CLIL type approach to education.

There are, however, some potential drawbacks to this methodology. It is difficult to monitor the preparation stage of the projects due to the conflicting aims of allowing the groups creative freedom whilst ensuring that they are working effectively as a team. There is a danger of quieter members in a group being overwhelmed by more dominant personalities and consequently not having adequate input into group decisions. A similar situation can develop with students who intentionally sit back and allow others to do all the preparation. One further objection by some learners to a content-focused approach is the impression that they are not being 'taught' the language. This can stem from the belief that language is a set of rules that comprise a linguistic system and that the only way to learn the language is to master those rules. It is often difficult to disabuse someone of this notion and

the approach I find most effective is to state clearly in the course description the methods which will be employed and repeat the rationale behind the approach frequently during the course. In this way the students should be forewarned and ideally recognize the validity of the teaching practice.

Conclusions

The use of presentations in content-focused classrooms at the tertiary level in the Japanese EFL context has the potential for some notable beneficial outcomes. CLIL's suitability for EFL contexts as recognized by the European Commission, in combination with the latent linguistic competence of English learners in Japan makes it a particular suitable methodology. My own experience of adding an emphasis on presentation skills within a content-focused framework appears to give validity to the pedagogy and results in high learner-satisfaction. Moving forward I would like to work toward a closer integration of content and language and build upon the content and skill-focused methodology I have utilized to this point. It might also be beneficial to apply more rigorous research methods in an attempt to measure if there are any significant changes in cognition, motivation, or orientations such as willingness to communicate, that can be attributed to this methodological approach.

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