Research Notes on Materials Development for Content-based Language Learning

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Introduction

During a recent six-month sabbatical, the author was engaged in four research projects. One project was to collect information on international perspectives on faculty development. That research included attendance at the annual conference of the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL). The conference stressed the importance of student engagement through active learning, real-world projects, and critical thinking. The second research project involved collecting information on materials development for first-year academic success courses (study skills). That research included attendance at the annual conference on The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition sponsored by the National Resource Center at the University of South Carolina. The third research project involved joint research with a colleague at a national university. That project involved collecting and analyzing data on the effects of short-term study abroad on the English language ability of Japanese university students. The fourth research project involved preparing a bibliography and collecting information on materials development for content-based language teaching, especially regarding the Japanese context. Below are some research notes concerning this fourth research project, which is ongoing. Specifically, this paper offers an example of what a proposal for a content-based textbook might include, what advice an author might provide to instructors who decide to use it, and a list of references for further reading.

Background

Content-based language teaching (CBLT) is nothing new for junior colleges in Japan. For example, Hokusei Gakuen Women's Junior College began doing it in 1994, Heian Jogakuin (St. Agnes') Women's Junior College in 2000, Morioka

Women's Junior College in 2001, and Aichi University Junior College in 2004 or 2005. Aoyama Gakuin Women's Junior College has been doing it for many years as well. In English departments at the university level, Nanzan University and Aoyama Gakuin University began CBLT programs in the early 1990's. More recently, Brooks and Sandkamp (2007) described their own CBLT curriculum development project at Asia University. Many of this programs or courses include or are based on global issues and societal problems as their organizing theme. Others are disciplined-based programs that emphasize mastery of specific content knowledge.
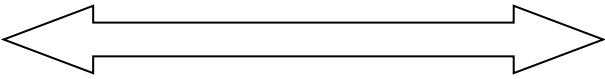
Overall, reports and research on CBLT in Japan suggest that that content-based English programs work well with Japanese learners if certain conditions are met. First, the students' ability should not be too low. Students struggling with basic vocabulary and grammar will likely have difficulty in a course that stresses contents over language skills. Second, there should be several different themes covered in one semester so students do not lose interest. Third, there should be a balance of personal topics and public topics. Each topic area, personal or public, has its own appeal for stimulating student engagement. Fourth, if the aim of the program is to measurably improve language skills, these skills should be clearly specified (task-based learning, can-do statements), or the students should take required discrete-skills (writing, reading, listening, speaking) courses concurrently or before taking content-based courses. Fifth, instructors need to use a variety of teaching techniques and adjust the pace and contents of the course to fit their particular students. Finally, the materials need to be easy for both the teacher and students to use.

A central concern in the development of a content-based language learning course is the balance of content and language. Met (1999) describes CBLT as being either "content-driven" or "language-driven" as seen in Figure 1. In practice, however, CBLT lies on a continuum between these two extremes, as seen in Figure 2. One major difference between these two approaches is that students in content-driven courses are evaluated on their mastery of content, not their language skills. In contrast, students in language-driven courses are evaluated on their language skills. Another major difference is that in discipline-based courses, the content becomes increasingly more advanced as the learners progressive through the syllabus. On the other hand, in language-based courses, the content itself does not need to progress in difficulty over the duration of the course.

Figure1. Content-driven Versus Language-driven CBLT (Met 1999)

Content-driven	Language-driven
• Content is taught in L2. • Content learning is priority. • Language learning is secondary. • Content objective determined by course goals or curriculum. • Teachers must select language objectives. • Students evaluated on content mastery.	• Content is used to learn L2. • Language learning is priority. • Content learning is incidental. • Language objectives determined by L2 course goals or curriculum. • Students evaluated on content to be integrated. • Students evaluated on language skills (proficiency).

Figure 2: A Continuum of Content and Language Integration

Content-driven ⟷ Language-driven					
Taught by content instructors			*Team-teaching*	*Taught by language instructors*	
Total immer-sion.	Partial immer-sion	Sheltered courses (modified language and other support)	Adjunct model (language tutoring, etc.)	Theme-based courses	Language classes with frequent use of content for language practice

Note: Adapted from Met (1999)

Example of a Proposal for a Theme-based CBLT Textbook

Below are a few components of a sample proposal that a textbook writer could consider submitting to a publisher interested in producing a CBLT textbook (adapted from Andrade & Andrade, 2009).

Aim of the book. This textbook is intended for intermediate learners of English in Japanese universities. It is particularly suited for non-English majors who are studying English as one of their general education courses. Accordingly, it aims to provide interesting, content-based practice that will appeal to a variety of students. The book offers practice in theme-based general English in the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing with an emphasis on content. In addition, it includes practice quizzes in a TOEIC-style format that will be useful to many students. The units are designed to be easy to use for both teacher and students.

Themes and units: Current, meaningful, and useful. There will be 20 units divided into five themes covering topics of global and personal interest. Each theme will consist of four units. Several of the units will include information that compares and contrasts Japan with other regions of the world. The following themes will be covered: "Cyber World and Technology," "Globalization: Our Changing World," "Society: Changing for Better or Worse?" "Environment: What We Need to Do," and "Helping Ourselves and Helping Others." (See Figure 3 below for the topics covered.)

Unit format: Consistency and variety. Each unit will be content-based. That is, the focus will be on acquiring and using meaningful information. Units include photographs, graphics, passages for reading and listening, and exercises of various types that students are familiar with such as true-false questions, matching exercises, comprehension questions, multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blank sentences, and dictations. In addition, other exercises will encourage students to express themselves orally and in writing. The type and arrangement of contents and exercises vary from unit to unit so that each unit has something new. Vocabulary notes for uncommon words will be included either within each unit or in the glossary at the back of the textbook.

Quizzes: TOEIC-style listening and reading. There will be a two-page TOEIC-style quiz following the completion of each theme. Three of the quizzes will be listening quizzes, and three will be reading quizzes. The quizzes will follow the standard TOEIC format. listening quizzes will consist of the following sections:

(1) Photographs, (2) Question-Response, (3) Short-talk, and (4) Short-Conversation. The reading quizzes will consist of two sections: (1) grammar-vocabulary and (2) reading comprehension. These quizzes will recycle and reinforce the vocabulary taught in the previous units.

Supporting resources for teacher and students. The teacher's manual will include the following: (1) translations of all the reading and listening passages, (2) vocabulary and culture notes, (3) scripts for the listening passages, (4) advice on teaching each unit, (5) answers to all the exercises, (6) ideas for additional drills, and (7) suggestions for using videos (online, DVD) and websites for further practice. A CD-ROM containing the listening passages will be included with each student's book. There will also be a companion website (PC and mobile) with additional listening practice, exercises, and quizzes.

Summary of the key features. (1) High interest, current topics. (2) Thematic arrangement of topics. (3) Balance of public and personal issues. (3) Appealing photographs and graphics. (3) Abundant exercises. (4) Easy-to-use, familiar exercises. (5) TOEIC-style quizzes. (6) Audio CD (7) Companion website. (7) Bilingual teacher's manual.

Example of Information to Include in a Teacher's Manual

An important function of the Teacher's Manual is to clearly explain the rationale, for and layout of the material, in addition to provides suggestion on how to teach the lessons. An example adapted from material prepared for *Life in Our Global Village* (Andrade and Andrade, 2009) is below.

Overview and aim of the lessons. The lessons aim to provide interesting, content-based practice on the general theme of global change and our place in the "global village." Each lesson offers intermediate-level practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing with an emphasis on understanding content and then expressing one's opinion about it. The textbook consists of 20 units, which are divided into five themes covering topics of public and personal interest. There is some deliberate overlapping of content and vocabulary among units based on the same theme. This overlapping is intended to promote comprehension and fluency. In addition to having improved their English language skills, students who have successfully completed this textbook will have a deeper understanding of how the world is changing and what they can do to make it better.

Figure 3. Types of Exercises in Each Unit
(Adapted from Andrade & Andrade, 2009)

Unit	Image	Warm-Up	Vocabulary	Listen & Read	True or False	Comprehension	Fill in the Blanks	Fill in the Table	Dictation	Make a Sentence	What Do You Think?	Other
1. Cell Phones	fig	○	○	○	○	○	○				○	
2. Online Social Networks	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	
3. Cyber Tips & Trouble	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○		○		○	
4. Vending Machines	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	
5. Indian IT Workers	pho	○	○	○	○	○		○	○	○	○	
6. Global Economy	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	
7. Fair Trade	pho	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	○	
8. Genetic Modified Foods	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	
9: Food Miles	fig	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	
10. Population Trends	fig	○	○	○		○	○		○		○	
11. Richer or Poorer?	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	
12. UN Develop. Goals	pho	○	○	○	○	○	○			○		○
13. Global Warming	fig	○	○	○	○	○	○				○	
14: The Water Crisis	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	
15. Green Belt Movement	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	
16. The New JICA	fig	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	
17. Good Night's Rest	tab	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○		○	
18. Safe Driving	ill	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○		○	
19. Keys to Happiness	fig	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	
20. Service Learning	pho	○	○	○	○	○	○					○

Key: ill = illustration, fig = graph, pho = photograph, tab = table

Format of the lessons. The core of each unit is the "Listen & Read" section, which presents the contents of the unit in detail. This section is preceded by warm-up and vocabulary building activities, and is followed by exercises to check comprehension. Further exercises, many of which combine listening and reading,

expand the contents introduced in the core section and give students practice in additional language skills as well. The unit wraps up with a "What do you think?" or alternative activity that allows students to express themselves more freely. For details on which exercises appear in which unit, see Figure 3.

Evaluation of learning outcomes. The contents and method of evaluation will vary depending on which skills the teacher would like to emphasize, the size of the class, and other aspects of the teaching situation. If the class is very large, the teacher may not be able to check homework weekly and so may have to rely on midterm and final exams. Some common ways of evaluating student performance are listed below:

1. Did the student complete all the homework assignments on time?
2. How many points correct did the student get on the objective textbook exercises?
3. Did the student participate actively in the classroom activities (e.g., pair work and small group work)?
4. How well did the student answer the teacher's questions about the text?
5. How well did the student complete the "What Do You Think?" or alternative assignments?
6. Did the student take good notes for the "Listen and Take Notes" activity?
7. How well did the student write a summary or opinion of the unit?
8. How well did the student give an oral summary or opinion of the unit?
9. How well did the student do on short quizzes (for example, vocabulary, dictation, comprehension questions, writing a short summary or opinion in class)?
10. How well did the student do on the midterm and final examinations?

Model lesson plan. Below are some suggestions for teaching each of the sections of each unit. Teachers, of course, should use their own judgment and creativity to adapt the units to fit their teaching situation.

1. Title and subtitle:
   Read aloud or ask students to read aloud the title and subtitles. Ask what that title means and try to elicit any background knowledge the students may have on the topic.

2. Image (photograph, illustration, graph):

   Every unit begins with a photograph, illustration, or graph related to the topic of the lesson. Depending on the ability level of the class, the teacher can ask students to describe or interpret the image or use the image to elicit vocabulary related to the topic. Graphs are more complex than the photos and illustrations, so may take more time to interpret. The teacher can ask his/her own questions about the graph, varying the level of difficulty to suit their ability level. In some units, a question in the Warm-Up section is related to contents of the graph. As an optional activity for higher ability classes, students may be asked to write a short paragraph explaining what a graph means after completing the unit.

3. Warm-Up:

   These questions can be used to stimulate interest in the topic and elicit the students' background knowledge. Not all the questions need to be done. Teachers can add their own questions as well.

4. Vocabulary:

   This exercise can be done at home before class and the answers checked in class. *Optional Activity 1:* After checking the answers, students can work with a partner. One partner reads aloud a definition while the other partner covers the definition in his/her book and tries to recall the correct word. After doing about five words or more, they exchange roles. *Optional Activity 2:* Ask students to tell you synonyms or antonyms for the words in the list.

5. Listen and Read:

   The reading passages can be assigned either as a homework assignment before class or else introduced in class and read again closely as homework. A model procedure for teaching the passage is below, which can be modified to suit the teaching situation.

   (1) *Preview activity:* To get an impression of the contents, first read the subtitles that introduce each paragraph and look at the image or sidebar (information box) that appears with the reading. The subtitles set a purpose for reading.
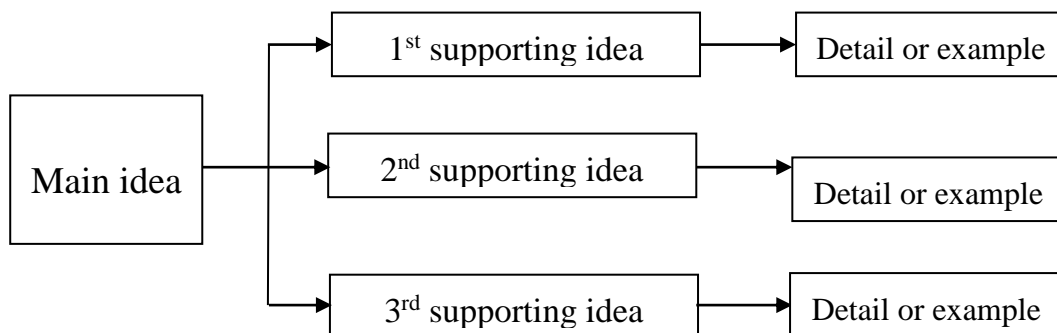
(2) *First listening:* With books closed, students listen to the CD to get an overall impression. This activity may be repeated with books open. The teacher can write a few simple questions on the blackboard to make this step a listening comprehension activity. The subtitles that introduce each paragraph can often be used for this purpose as well.

(3) *Read aloud:* Working with a partner or in small groups of three or four students, students read aloud the passage. Each student reads one sentence in turn. Emphasize that students should sit up straight, hold their book in their hands, and speak clearly with good pronunciation and good intonation. If they do not understand a word or sentence, they can ask each other for help or ask the teacher.

(4) *Close reading:* For lower ability classes, most readings are short enough so that they can be studied line-by-line if necessary within a typical 90-minute class period. The teacher can call on a student to read aloud one or two sentences, and then ask the student a question to confirm his/her comprehension. If necessary, the teacher can provide an explanation or paraphrase to help the student understand the meaning. To keep everyone involved, from time to time have the whole class repeat aloud key vocabulary items for pronunciation practice. Higher ability classes may not need to do a line-by-line close reading with the teacher. Instead, the teacher can ask his/her own comprehension questions or ask the students to re-tell the contents of the reading using their own words. Alternatively, students can work with a partner or in small groups, make their own comprehension questions, and quiz each other.

Note that most passages are in standard paragraph form beginning with a topic sentence (main idea) followed by supporting statements. Also, note the use of transition expressions such as "however" and "in addition" that help clarify the relationship between sentences. Students can use these paragraphs as models for their own writing. The structure of the paragraphs and longer readings can be made clear by using a graphic organizer such as the one below (Figure 4) and by asking questions such as "What is the main idea? How many supporting ideas are there? What are they?"

Figure 4. Model of a simple paragraph structure

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┌─────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
│             │ ────▶│  1ˢᵗ supporting idea  │ ────▶│  Detail or example   │
│             │      └──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
│  Main idea  │ ────▶┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
│             │      │  2ⁿᵈ supporting idea  │ ────▶│  Detail or example   │
│             │      └──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
└─────────────┘ ────▶┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────┐
                     │  3ʳᵈ supporting idea  │ ────▶│  Detail or example   │
                     └──────────────────────┘      └──────────────────────┘
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(5) *Second Listening:* With books closed, students listen to the CD again. For additional practice, students can repeat along with CD with their books either open or closed.

6. True or False and Comprehension Questions:

These questions focus mainly on reading for main ideas, reading for detail, and making inferences. They can be done as homework or in class. Call on students one by one to check their answers.

7. Fill in the Blanks and Fill in the Table:

Most units have some type of fill-in-the-blank exercise, which may be in the form of a paragraph, conversation, or table. The aim of these exercises varies. An exercise may focus on verb forms, noun forms, prepositions, articles, vocabulary items, or deducing words based on context. These exercises can be done at home before class. In class, students can work together in small groups, read aloud the sentences, and compare their answers with their partners. Afterward, the teacher can play call on students one by one to check their answers or play the CD and have them listen for the answers. To save time, this activity can be done with the whole class rather than in small groups.

8. Student-made Comprehension Questions:

After completing a Fill-in-the- Blanks exercise, the teacher can give the students a few minutes to write their own comprehension questions and then let

them quiz each other. The teacher can introduce this activity by saying something like this: "Imagine that you are the teacher. What questions would you ask about this passage?" Write down several true-false or comprehension questions using who, what, when, where, why, or how. You have (5) minutes to prepare."

9. Dictation:

A few units have dictation exercises that direct the students to fill in one word or a short phrase. The sentences are thematically related and form a complete paragraph. As above in the fill-in-the-blank exercises, the aim of the dictations varies. After completing this exercise, the teacher can give the students a few minutes to write their own comprehension questions as described in item 7 above.

10. Make a Sentence:

About half of the units have a "Make a Sentence" exercise in which students rearrange words and phrases to complete a sentence. The sentences are thematically related to each other and often form a complete paragraph. Call on students one by one to check their answers. These exercises can be done at home before class.

11. What Do You Think? and Listen & Take Notes (optional activities):

The questions in this section are examples of a follow-up writing task that can be assigned for homework and then presented at the beginning of the next class. Student can write their answers on a separate piece of paper. For presentations, divide the class into pairs or small groups. Students read aloud their answers while the other members of the group take notes. After taking notes, the students confirm what they wrote by asking, "You said (   ). Is that right?" Note-taking can be done on a piece of paper or in a notebook.

12. Alternative activities: Summary, opinion, and discussion:

Instead of answering the "What Do You Think?" questions, students can write a summary and their opinion of the topics covered in the unit. With a partner or in small groups, they read their summaries and opinions, and then discuss the topic freely among themselves or with the teacher. To write a summary, students can

follow a format such as the one below:

"This unit is about *(the good and bad points of using cell phones)*. There are
(*3*) main ideas. First, ( ). ( ). Second, ( ). ( ). Finally, ( ).
( ).The conclusion is ( )."

To write an opinion, students can follow a format such as the one below:

"As for my opinion on (*cell phones)*, there are (two) points I would like to
make. My first point is ( ). ( ). My second point is ( ). ( ).
In conclusion, I think ( )."

As for the contents of the opinion, students can write freely, or they can use questions such as the ones below to guide their writing.

(1) What did you find interesting, surprising, shocking, or strange about this topic?

(2) How is this topic related to your life?

(3) How is this topic related to Japan?

(4) What is something new that you learned from this unit?

(5) Have you changed your ideas about anything because of what you read in this unit?

(6) What more would you like to know about this topic?

(7) What do you agree or disagree with in this unit?

(8) What do you predict will happen in the future regarding this topic?

(9) What solutions do you suggest for solving the problems mentioned in this unit?

(10) If you were the author of this textbook, what would you have written about this topic?

Summary

This paper has briefly described some of the issues involved in materials development for content-based language learning, especially as they relate to teaching in Japanese colleges and universities. It offers an example of what a proposal for a content-based textbook might include and what advice an author might provide to the instructor who decides to use such a book. In addition, this paper includes an extensive list of references on content-based teaching and learning in Japan that will be useful to other researchers, material writers, and instructors who are interested in this topic.

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18