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Implementing English Language Content Based Elective Classes At Osaka University

大阪大学における Content Based Class (英語専攻選択科目) の実践について

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Abstract

This article describes a number of undergraduate English language major elective content based courses at a Japanese public university, providing overall course outlines, class activities, sample homework tasks, analysis of end-of-semester student feedback and suggestions for improvements for subsequent course iterations.

Keywords: English as a medium of instruction, EMI, English as a second language, ESL, presentation and discussion instruction, elective classes, content based courses, European Culture, Japanese Culture, Global Issues.

1. Introduction

In the English language education field, the challenge continues for educators to provide their students with opportunities to meaningfully engage with authentic second language (L2) materials and activities with the aim of, amongst others, enabling them to produce presentations leading to meaningful and authentic L2 discussions. This brief article aims to describe a number of courses at Osaka University School of Foreign Studies which attempt to provide solutions to this common problematic issue.

This article describes a number of courses that were conducted at Osaka University School of Foreign Studies for 3rd and 4th year English major students in the academic year 2017-18. These courses were non-compulsory elective classes and assume a TOEIC score of 730 or above as all students are required to achieve this level in order to progress from second- to third-year students at the School of Foreign Studies. As these courses are elective in nature, it would be fair to assume that student motivation might be relatively high compared to other, compulsory courses elsewhere.

The courses described here could be argued to blur the boundaries between English language classes and ‘content’ classes, and indeed they might even be described as belonging to the genre of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). The British Council defines EMI as the “use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language

(L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Dearden, 2015), and also notes that this is a current global educational phenomenon. The nature of the content described herein (three courses, specifically Global Issues, Japanese Cultures and Societies and European Cultures and Societies) lends itself well, it is argued here, to this style of instruction, and was indeed designed with this global phenomenon in mind. The plan for each of these courses is such that students are required to research every week and present and discuss in every lesson, and as a result, they can enjoy multiple chances to improve their language and other skills incrementally throughout the course.

2. Description of the courses

The courses specifically described in this article are Global Issues in English (GIE), European Cultures and Societies in English (ECS), and Japanese Cultures and Societies (JCS). There follows a brief description of the courses and weekly student tasks, as well as example class activities, which are presented in order to give an idea of course organization and student participation.

The GIE course is intended to provide students with opportunities to raise awareness of and ability to describe and discuss contemporary global issues in English, with the learning goals stated as being for students to improve their ability to describe, discuss and make presentations concerning contemporary global issues in English. The role of the English language is particularly key in this course as the information required for successful completion of research tasks is less likely to be available from Japanese language sources, which is the L1 of all students on the course, given the specialized nature of the tasks, for example LGBTI issues in Sudan or the political system in Venezuela. The relatively specific nature of research areas indeed necessitates extensive student engagement with authentic L2 material.

In the GIE course, the whole class is allocated one theme which changes on a weekly basis. Considering the title of the course, the weekly themes necessarily vary greatly, from cultural aspects such as cuisine, music, film, the arts, to societal issues such as LGBTI issues, homelessness and gender issues to other weighty themes such as the environment, politics, justice, business and finance. However, although the weekly theme is the same for all students, each student is required to carry out their research related to a different country around the world. When the class convenes in the following lesson, each student will have completed research on a common theme, but for a different country. Assuming there are 20 students in the class, there will therefore be 20 “experts” on the week’s theme in 20 different countries, and potentially class attendees will hear presentations on a wide variety of countries, again, all based on largely authentic materials.

In a typical GIE class, students are asked to initially divide into groups of roughly 4 and make their presentations and listen to other group members’ presentations. Their task while carrying

out this part of the lesson is to take notes on the presentations they hear in order to summarize them to another set of students when they are regrouped in the next stage of the lesson. It is hoped that through this process, salient information on all the countries researched by students will be presented to provide background to and inform the final discussion stages of the class, based on students' and the teacher's broader discussion questions.

In the ECS and JCS courses, the format is slightly different to the GIE course described above, but still employs a similar division of students into smaller research groups in order to facilitate presentations and meaningful, authentic discussions.

In ECS, all students are allocated the same theme, again which changes weekly, and are asked to research that theme in one of 6 European countries. Examples of these weekly themes might include cultural ones such as literature, music, environment, and societal ones such as education, health and religion etc. The countries are selected from the full list of European countries (both EU and non-EU) according to their relevance to that particular week's theme. Students then carry out their research on their given country and theme and convene the following week into 6 groups dictated by the researched country, so that all those who looked specifically at Spain, for instance, meet at the start of the lesson to exchange information and ideas about Spain. The JCS course follows a broadly similar set of processes to ECS, except all students have a weekly theme but are given a specific area within that theme to research for the following lesson. For example, in the week concentrating on religion in Japan, students are required to research one of Buddhism, Shinto, Christianity, new religions etc. This initial stage of the class is necessary because students will inevitably discover different information in their research, and this stage provides them with opportunities to exchange this information and enhance the content of their own subsequent presentations.

In both ECS and JCS, initial groups tend to consist of 3 or 4 students, and they are encouraged to exchange their information and augment their own presentations where they deem appropriate. This often has the effect of enlarging content and consolidating research and ideas as well as focusing on relevant vocabulary and terminology. Another effect of working in smaller groups like this has the added benefit of serving as a practice session for students in preparation for the subsequent presentations in slightly larger groups. At this stage, the country or subject specific groups are also required to create discussion questions based on the weekly topic. These questions are collected by the teacher and then shared on the white board or projector screen. After an appropriate amount of time, say 15 minutes, students are reorganized, where possible depending on numbers, into groups of 6, where each student is an expert on one particular European country in ECS or one aspect of Japanese culture and society in JCS. This creates the information gap

required for authentic communication to take place, both in terms of presentations and subsequent discussions.

3. Typical homework tasks

For their weekly homework in GIE, ECS and JCS, students are asked to prepare a 5 minute presentation on their findings of their country or specific area of research in relation to the weekly theme. In addition, they are also asked to provide a number of both content questions and discussion questions. The content questions are asked before the presentation starts and should be related specifically to their presentation, and should largely be fact-based “WH” questions, for example ‘WHen did the revolution occur?’ or ‘WHere is the pollution worst?’. The rationale behind asking students to prepare these questions is twofold; so that their audience can focus on the accuracy of the delivery of the presentation and also so that their audience will be paying attention to the presentation and the key facts therein. The presenting students are also asked to prepare a ‘secret question’ which is held back from the audience until the end of their presentation, to encourage students to take notes more generally on any potential facts that might be asked of them, and thus increase their engagement with the content of the presentation. The question and answer section at the end of each presentation allows students to participate in a group activity which aims to check and consolidate specific content from the presentation.

In order to give an idea of the kind of homework research tasks that are set on these courses, there follows an example from each of the ECS and JCS courses. At the end of each ECS class, homework tasks are distributed and countries allocated for preparation for the subsequent lesson.

Examples are provided below.

EUROPEAN CULTURES AND SOCIETIES SAMPLE HOMEWORK TASK

TOPIC	SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH
IMMIGRATION / EMIGRATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • STATISTICS • WHERE FROM? EUROPEAN / NON-EUROPEAN COUNTRIES • WHERE TO? • REASONS FOR MIGRATION • SAFETY? • WELFARE PROVISION • CRIME? • POLITICS? • EMPLOYMENT? • LANGUAGE PROBLEMS? • LOCAL ATTITUDES, NOW AND IN THE PAST. • DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDE ACCORDING TO COUNTRY / AGE / GENDER ETC • PROBLEMS / SOLUTIONS • <i>WHY IS IMMIGRATION SUCH A HOT TOPIC NOW IN EUROPE?</i> • <i>IS IMMIGRATION SUCH A HOT TOPIC IN JAPAN? WHY / WHY NOT?</i>

As can be seen from the example, there are many possible avenues of enquiry for students to pursue, and necessarily because of the time restraint of 5 minutes for each presentation, it is not possible to cover all aspects, so students tend to focus on areas of particular interest to them. This research can then be ‘rounded out’ in the information exchange session at the start of every lesson with other students who researched the same country. The inclusion of the discussion questions is intended to ‘get the ball rolling’ and act as a transition between the presentations and discussions.

JAPANESE CULTURES AND SOCIETIES SAMPLE HOMEWORK TASK

VISUAL ART

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Katsushika Hokusai 2. Kitagawa Utamaro 3. Utagawa Hiroshige 4. Taro Okamoto 5. Tadanori Yokoo 6. Takashi Murakami 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biography • Famous work • Influences • Themes • Styles • Influence on the West • Fame in Japan
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In this case, each student is allocated just one of the 6 artists, with generic suggestions for research applicable to all. Again, time constraints on the presentation inevitably lead to specialization within the limits of the individual subjects, and again this can be ameliorated by the initial information exchange session at the start of each lesson. It is felt that the broad nature of the research task engenders individual responses which potentially increases the variety of information available for presentation.

4. Student and teacher roles

On these courses, as the boundaries between English Language classes and ‘content’ classes are blurred, so are those between the roles of the participating students and teacher. Students are encouraged to become ‘experts’ of their own country or theme and to teach other students about these in English, as well as being encouraged to learn from other students who are ‘experts’ in a different area or country. Equally, the participating teacher is in the dual position of educator and learner, as inevitably students produce information unknown to the teacher. This has the effect of being motivating to the students and also providing genuinely authentic exchanges in English. Naturally, the teacher is always ready to act as an authority on language aspects which may arise, such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary if required.

5. Students’ responses and feedback

Towards the end of the courses, student questionnaires were carried out to ascertain students’ reactions to and thoughts on the course. In particular, the questions aimed to discover students’ reasons for taking the course, how much the course had helped with their English language abilities, presentation and discussion skills, and also how much the course had improved their content knowledge of the course, be that Global Issues, European Cultures and Societies or Japanese Cultures and Societies. Various themes of student responses emerged, namely improvements in English language research skills, productive English language skills and improvements in course content knowledge and understanding, and these themes are briefly detailed below.

The vast majority of students were overwhelmingly positive about the effect that the courses had had on their English language skills in terms of vocabulary, discussion skills and confident speaking, amongst others. Typical comments were ‘I could get a chance to speak English every week. I could learn new vocab or expression through this course’, ‘Throughout my research at home, I got a lot of vocabulary. I also improved my English in discussion time’, and ‘I learned to speak English spontaneously, because I didn’t prepare for whole sentences, just key words. It worked well’. The nature of students’ responses indicates that the courses had been beneficial in the

development of their English skills.

The presentation guidelines distributed at the beginning of the course expressly recommend only using English language resources, rather than using Japanese sources and then translating these for the purpose of presenting in English. A number of students responded positively to this requirement in the questionnaire. One wrote that ‘I have to research articles in English because there are more articles written in English than that in Japanese’ while another commented that ‘other countries’ information is not easy to find if I search in Japanese’. Students can therefore be seen to have benefitted from the discipline of limiting their research resources solely to those written in English, their L2.

As noted earlier, the course plan requires students to carry out a manageable amount of research, presentation and discussion every week. Many students responded positively to a question about whether the wide variety of topics had helped improved their English. One response was typical; ‘I have to tell other people what I learned from the previous group members. That takes a lot of skills’. Another noted the variety of subject matter helped widen their active English vocabulary; ‘to deliver the presentation, I have to learn new words every week’. The variety of weekly themes presented in this course can be seen, therefore, to help increase students’ passive and active vocabulary related to the course content.

Many students on the GIE course mentioned that their knowledge of international issues increased over the course. For example, one stated that ‘there were many countries I didn’t know at all if my friends didn’t make a presentation’, while another one reflected that the course had improved ‘not only English abilities but also my knowledge and horizon to the world’. Similarly positive answers were collected from students of the ECS and JCS courses. This appears to demonstrate that genuine and authentic L2 information exchange occurred often to contribute not only to expansion of content knowledge but also to improvements in students’ abilities to describe and discuss this content in their L2.

6. Reflections for future courses

Having run these courses at Osaka University for one year, it would seem an opportune moment to reflect and consider improvements for the next iterations of the courses. These reflections are responses to a number of potentially problematic issues and students’ comments arising from the questionnaire. Typical issues would be perhaps universal in this kind of learning environment of monolingual Japanese university students. Unfortunately, one strategy that a small number of students developed was to read out long sections of detailed English explanations of a certain topic that was clearly copied from Wikipedia or a similar website. In this kind of situation

on these courses I have again drawn students' attention to the presentation guidelines distributed at the start of each course, namely that

Your presentation should...

- be about 5 minutes long
- NOT be read out. Notes are OK, but no memorization!
- ideally include visual material, ie graphs, tables, photos etc
- be followed by an opportunity for your audience to ask questions

As students' motivation levels are generally high, this gentle reminder is frequently sufficient, although the teacher has to remain vigilant throughout the course to prevent students from slipping into bad habits.

In the questionnaire, some students mentioned that they would have preferred more instruction on presentation and discussion skills. One possibility for future versions of the courses might be to introduce an occasional presentation feedback section, whereby class colleagues provide peer feedback on elements of the presentation, for example coherence, pronunciation, referring to visuals, eye contact, and so on. Another might be to provide specific instruction on the devising of effective discussion questions.

7. Conclusion

This brief article has attempted to describe a number of courses taught to undergraduate students at Osaka University School of Foreign Studies. In particular, the course structure, typical homework and in-class tasks were highlighted. Student feedback in the form of end-of-course questionnaires informed teacher reflection on improvements in course design and problem-solving strategies.

Overall, the courses described here can be seen to have had positive impacts on students' English language research, presentation and discussion skills, and although by no means perfect, provide a solid basis for further improvements in subsequent versions of the courses.

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