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# Content-Based Foreign Language Instruction in a Japanese University Setting: Investigating Student Motivation

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## 1. Introduction

Content-based instruction is a kind of instruction based on the idea that language is best learned when learners are encouraged to use the target language to do something which involves meaningful content. The author has been using this idea in teaching English as a foreign language at Kanagawa University for several years. In the classes, students conduct a research project. They are requested to choose a social and controversial topic, research it, and give a presentation about it. In this paper, two questions are examined: 1) What kind of factors in the project positively affect students' motivation? 2) Is there a correlation between students' motivation in self-instruction and keeping study logs? Since this is a classroom research project using only three classes, the amount of data is limited. In this paper, the general idea of content-based instruction is introduced followed by the experimental design, results and discussion.

## 2. Content-based instruction

Years of research on content-based instruction have demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach in ESL and EFL settings. Based on various research results and second language acquisition research, the following advantages seem to be expected when applied to EFL in Japanese university setting:

- 1) Development of academic language functions;
- 2) Acquisition of overall language proficiency;
- 3) Acquisition of learning strategies;
- 4) Enhanced motivation;
- 5) Development of cultural understanding.

*Development of academic language functions.* Snow and Brinton (1997) proposed that students need to develop cognitive academic language proficiency in order to succeed in academic learning contexts. To satisfy the language needs of ESL/ EFL students in this international society, language instruction should include more cognitive activities such as critical thinking, comparing, summarizing, and synthesizing at the university level. Content-based instruction fully responds to this requirement.

*Acquisition of overall language proficiency.* Traditionally, Japanese EFL from junior high school to university level has concentrated mainly on teaching grammar, vocabulary, and reading. Creative writing, listening, and speaking tend to be ignored. Moreover, instruction focuses on only one specific skill at a time. Thus, students perceive that the one aspect of language they are studying at a given time is the ultimate subject matter to be learned. As a result of this, they lose motivation because they cannot

“use” the language to do something meaningful. Content-based instruction offers opportunities to use all language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

*Acquisition of learning strategies.* In relation to the development of academic language functions, learning strategies can be learned through content-based instruction. Chamot and O'Malley (1994) stated that learning strategies can be successfully learned in academic language learning and then transferred to learning activities other than ESL. Chamot and O'Malley (1994) categorized these learning strategies in three groups: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies include planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning activities. Cognitive strategies include using resources, classifying, organizing, elaborating prior knowledge, summarizing, making inferences, and using deduction and induction. Social affective strategies include interacting with another person in order to assist in learning, as in cooperative learning, and asking questions for clarification.

*Enhanced motivation.* Leaver and Stryker (1989) noted that enhanced motivation is one of the advantages of their content-based instruction to adult students. They reported that the students were highly motivated and fully involved in the courses when “real issues” became the focus of the study. In a previous study, the author proposed the following as factors that can enhance motivation (Okazaki, 1997):

- 1) use of authentic materials;
- 2) meaningful activities;
- 3) personal choice of activities;
- 4) recognition of self-progress;
- 5) creativity in activities;

- 6) use of various sensory stimuli;
- 7) appropriate but challenging tasks;
- 8) use of preferred learning strategies.

*Development of cultural understanding.* In Japanese university setting, content-based instruction seems to be suitable for raising students' awareness of intercultural understanding. Through the use of authentic materials such as TV or radio programs, magazines and newspapers, and information via the Internet, students increase their awareness and understanding of various issues in foreign countries. International politics, regional studies, human rights, and/or environmental issues can be suggested to university students according to their academic level.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **1) Subjects**

Subjects for the study were first year students who were enrolled in a required English course at Kanagawa University Hiratsuka Campus. Based on the scores on the Freshman Placement Test developed by the university staff, all students were allocated to three different proficiency groups; advanced level, intermediate level, and lower proficiency level. Among three groups, advanced level and intermediate level were chosen as subjects, since the previous study by the author (Okazaki, 1999) showed that the lower level is not suitable to a content-based instruction. In general, students in Group A did not have difficulty in reading and writing, but they had had little exposure to listening and speaking. Students in Group B had difficulty to a certain degree in reading and writing to a certain degree, but were able to read and write several paragraphs with the help of a dictionary.

## **2) Class activities**

Students attended a whole academic-year course consisting of two semesters. The focus of the content-based course was the second semester, in which students conducted a research project. Class activities in the first semester were designed to empower students to conduct a research project effectively in the second semester. Activities in the first semester include; public speaking, interpreting practice to improve speaking and listening skills, paragraph organization and essay writing. In the second semester, students conducted research projects and at the end of the semester, they gave oral presentations which were approximately 30 minutes long. They were asked to choose one social and controversial topic, and make a group according to the theme. Each group consists of four to five students. Throughout the semester, students engaged in both group work and instructor-oriented activities. Instructor-oriented activities included video lessons of effective research presentations, introduction to the research method, introduction to a library and computer search, organization of research, useful expressions for a presentation, video review of the students' presentation, and evaluation. Students-oriented activities had five stages; planning, information search, outlining, draft writing, and oral presentation. In the oral presentation, students were encouraged to use audiovisual materials effectively.

## **4. Results and discussion**

### **1) Course evaluation**

Students were asked to evaluate the course by rating it according to the Likert-type 5-point scale, which ranges from strongly disagree (1point) to

strongly agree (5 points). To the question “The course was valuable to me,” 71% of Group A students and 76% of Group B students provided a positive answer (Scales 4 and 5). To the question “The course was interesting,” 58% of Group A students and 56% of Group B students provided a positive answer. To the question “I was motivated and learned eagerly,” 63% of students in Group A and 70% in Group B gave a positive answer (Table 1). No significant difference was observed between Group A and Group B. Students generally felt that the course was valuable and they were motivated and learned eagerly.

The positive comments from the students’ questionnaires were categorized into several groups according to the motivation factors previously examined. The comments, which cannot be categorized into these groups, were then categorized into the three learning strategies mentioned earlier in the paper.

Table 1

Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Question					
“The course was valuable to me.”					(%)
Group A	4	4	21	33	38
Group B	0	6	18	53	23
“The course was interesting.”					
Group A	6	7	2	29	29
Group B	0	12	32	32	24
“I was motivated and learned eagerly.”					
Group A	0	8	29	29	34
Group B	3	9	18	38	32

### I Use of authentic materials

- It was good not to use a textbook for the class. I was able to use “real English.”

### II Meaningful activities

- I was able to use English rather than learn grammar points.
- I was able to understand paragraph organization, which is useful in other kinds of university work.
- It was good to have the opportunity to speak in front of others. The skill of public speaking is useful in Japanese as well.
- I was able to learn not only English but also public speaking and group work.
- I was able to use English to give a presentation. It was my first experience.
- I was able to learn many things (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) using English.
- I became interested in social issues.
- I learned how to evaluate presentations by other groups.
- This course views English as a communication tool. This is good.
- I learned how to make practical use of English.
- How to make an outline for the research paper is useful in other subjects as well.

### III Personal choice of activities

- It was good for students to have autonomy to plan the research project.
- I learned various ways to improve my English.
- Whether I can improve my English or not depends on my involvement in this project.

#### IV Recognition of self-progress

- I learned that even I can use English.
- I became confident because I had a sense of achievement. Since I was given autonomy to prepare for the presentation, I had to do it.

#### V Creativity in activities

- It was good to write sentences rather than just translate a Japanese text into English.

#### VI Appropriate but challenging tasks

- It was very difficult to conduct research and give a presentation in English, but I had a great sense of achievement after my presentation.

#### VII Use of various sensory stimuli

No comments expressed.

#### VIII Use of preferred learning strategies

- I appreciated having autonomy to conduct the research project.

### **Learning strategies**

#### I Metacognitive strategies

- It was good for me to organize my learning activities (Self-management).

#### II Cognitive strategies

- It was positive to experience identifying a problem and solving it.
- It was a rewarding new experience to choose a topic, research it, and give a presentation in English.
- I learned how to use a logical structure to persuade others.

#### III Social/affective strategies

- Group work was good because I was able to learn how to communicate and cooperate toward the goal.
- Group work was good because we encouraged each other.



According to the students' comments, four key elements are present: meaningful activities, cognitive strategies, social/affective strategies, and student autonomy (self-management). First of all, most comments show that the activities in the course were meaningful. Students commented that learning paragraph organization, conducting research, preparing a presentation, enhancing their public speaking, and acquiring the skill of critical thinking were meaningful because of the following two reasons: 1) These skills are useful in the future (e.g., in other university subjects in Japanese); and 2) They were able to use English rather than just learn about English. Secondly, the element of cognitive strategies can be understood in relation to the meaningfulness of the activities. Activities requiring cognitive strategies (finding the problem, selecting the information, synthesizing the information, and organizing the ideas logically) were evaluated highly by the students. Thirdly, social/affective strategies seem to be important. Many students positively evaluated group-work activities. They thought they were able to learn how to communicate and cooperate in order to conduct their research and eventually achieve the final goal, the oral presentation. Students also felt that they were able to help each other, and this was meaningful, especially when the activities were complicated and difficult. Lastly, students' autonomy seems to have played an important role in enhancing student motivation. The students evaluated highly the amount of freedom of choice and autonomy they were given to plan their work.

There were also negative comments expressed by both Group A and B students, but their number was smaller.

### **Negative comments**

- I wanted to acquire conversation skills. An oral presentation is not useful

to improve one's conversation skills.

- I wanted to study daily conversation.
- Listening practice is needed. I was not able to understand other people's presentations.
- I wanted to learn pronunciation.
- Too many things to do outside the class in this course. It was too hard to do.
- I was not interested in social issues at all.
- Somebody in my group was not cooperative. It was difficult to conduct group work.
- There is a big gap between students' ability and the required goal. More instruction to bridge this gap is needed.
- There are differences in students' level of English. The instructor should take this into account.

Two problems caused by the course structure were brought up in the students' comments. Firstly, there is a preference for other activities not included in the course such as listening, daily conversation, and pronunciation practice. Secondly, supplemental instruction is needed in order for the course to succeed. The second problem should and can be addressed to further improve the course. Listening instruction should be included.

## 2) Difficulty expressed by the students in Groups A and B

In the "Comments" section of the evaluation, students were asked to discuss the difficulty they had encountered in the five stages of the research project: planning, information search, outlining, draft writing, and oral

presentation. In the planning stage, there was no significant difference in the comments from students in Groups A and B. Both groups mentioned that they had difficulty focusing on the point to be researched, finding the problem to be solved, preparing the working plan, finding what to start with, and keeping to the schedule. In the step of information search, most of the comments dealt with the problem of discriminating between relevant and irrelevant information from the large body of information obtained. Comments from Group B varied. In addition to the problem raised by Group A students, some students mentioned the difficulty that they had encountered synthesizing the information in their group, understanding the information in English, and finding the source of information. Concerning the outlining phase, Group A students reflected on the difficulty of preparing an effective outline which could be easily understood by their audience. In addition to this problem, Group B students considered that it was difficult to divide the content into meaningful paragraphs and avoid contradiction in the organization. Some students in Group B expressed concern over the difficulty of understanding the conceptual difference between the paragraph organization in English and the Japanese KI-SYOU-TEN-KETSU (the four-part organization of Chinese poetry: introduction, development, turn, and conclusion, in the course of an event.) The most significant difference between Groups A and B surfaced in the stage of draft writing. The major problem expressed by Group A was writing simple, clear sentences. One student commented: "It is easy to write sentences I can understand, but it is very difficult to write sentences that other people can understand." Some students expressed concern over the grammatical correctness of their sentences. The most serious concern of Group B students was their lack of grammatical knowledge. They felt it was extremely difficult to write

sentences. One student commented, "It took me 20 minutes to write just one sentence in English because I cannot remember the English grammar I learned in high school." Further, they indicated that they were not able to assist each other in writing because nobody in their group was good at grammar. In addition to grammar, many students expressed concern about their lack of vocabulary. In the presentation stage, both Group A and B students felt they were afraid to speak in front of other people. Though students were instructed not to "read" from the draft but to "speak" with expression, some of the students in both Groups A and B commented: "I was not able to make enough eye contact because I was not used to "reading" from the draft."

The comments from the students show that Group B students generally need more assistance from the instructor than Group A students. However, students in both groups need more specific instruction on learning strategies. It also appeared that students, especially those in Group B, need to be taught learning strategies such as synthesizing and organizing the information. Students have to make use of metacognitive strategies in the planning stage and cognitive strategies in the stage of information search, outlining, and draft writing. Students are required to have social/affective strategies in all phases of the project and in the oral presentation stage. All students need to be taught these strategies. Chamot and O'Malley mentioned the importance of developing students' awareness of learning strategies, teaching the strategies explicitly, and providing many opportunities for strategy practice as well as evaluation and expansion of the strategies students have learned. Teaching such strategies may be difficult. Chamot and O'Malley propose the following way:

Teach the strategy explicitly by:

- Modeling how you use the strategy with a specific academic task by thinking aloud as you work through a task (e.g., reading a text or writing a paragraph).
- Giving the strategy a name and referring to it consistently by that name.
- Explaining to students how the strategy will help them learn the material.
- Describing when, how, and for what kinds of tasks they can use the strategy. (1994, p.71)

The problem of lack of grammar and vocabulary raised mainly by Group B students can be treated in connection with the instruction of the learning strategies. Since the research project requires cognitive learning strategies, the language students need is also related to higher-order thinking skills. Group B students need more support using this academic language to analyze, synthesize, inform, explain, compare, draw conclusions, and evaluate. Chamot and O'Malley point out that students not only need appropriate vocabulary to express their ideas but also must take command of a variety of grammatical structures and discourse features.

### 3) Study logs

All students were encouraged to plan their own work outside the classroom to improve their English proficiency. Students in one of two advanced classes (Group A) and an intermediate class (Group B) were asked to plan their own study and monitor their study and progress by keeping study logs, which they were asked to submit once a week. These study logs were read, commented on, and returned by the instructor the following week. Students in the other advanced class were not asked to keep study logs, but they were encouraged to study at home. This class was used as a

control group (Group C).

All students were asked to rank their self-instruction before and after the course.

**Table 2**

	1	2	3	4	5 (scale)
(Pre-course question)					
"I am eager to get involved with self-instruction."					
Group A	0	4	28	24	44 (%)
Group B	6	6	23	52	13
Group C	0	30	26	33	11
(Post-course question)					
"I eagerly got involved with self-instruction."					
Group A	0	17	29	37	17
Group B	0	12	44	26	18
Group C	19	15	19	35	12
"I felt that I made progress by self-instruction."					
Group A	0	25	21	37	17
Group B	3	18	41	26	12
Group C	23	15	42	23	0

**Table 3**  
(Question)

“Did keeping study logs facilitate your self-instruction?”

	Group A	Group B (%)
Yes	59	50
No	33	37
Not sure	8	3

Table 2 shows that there is no significant correlation between keeping study logs and the enhancement of motivation toward self-instruction. Another finding is that those who kept study logs felt the results of their self-instruction better than those who did not keep them. With regard to the effect of keeping study logs, 59% of Group A students and 50% of Group B students answered that keeping study logs facilitated their self-instruction.

In the “Comments” section, various positive and negative comments were expressed. The following are the major comments expressed by both Groups A and B. There was no significant difference in the nature of comments between Groups A and B.

### Positive comments

- Setting the goal and planning the study by myself facilitate the work.
- Setting the goal enhances my motivation to study.
- I was constantly under pressure to study. This pressure promotes self-instruction.
- I could always remember the need to study. It was good.
- I was able to get into the habit of studying English.
- I was able to address my weak point by planning the study by myself.

- I was able to study well because I made a detailed study plan weekly.
- I was able to get positively involved in my studies because I was not forced to study but I planned my own work.
- I was able to assess my achievement by writing about what I had studied.
- The sense of achievement enhanced my motivation to study.
- I need some kind of pressure to study. Otherwise, I will never study.
- I was motivated to study, and I acquired confidence in my studies.

### **Negative comments**

- I was not motivated to study.
- I got into the habit of studying, but I had a feeling that I was forced to study.
- I was not motivated from the start, so it was hard for me to study.
- The pressure to study was painful for me.
- Submitting study logs was mandatory, so I didn't learn well.
- I did not like the sense of obligation.
- I don't think self-management is important.
- I just set a goal, but I didn't achieve it.
- I wanted to study, but I didn't.
- I studied unwillingly.
- I did not know what to do. The homework assignment should have been given to me.

Negative comments were expressed by both Group A and Group B students. However, more students appreciated and made use of study logs in Group A than in Group B. When keeping study logs, students have to use three main kinds of self-management strategies: planning, monitoring, and



evaluating (Wenden, 1998). These strategies are categorized into metacognitive strategies. The result shows that only 50% of Group B and 60% of Group A made use of these strategies. The negative comments show that some students had difficulty managing them to organize their work or found no value in doing so. Some students disliked the pressure of submitting study logs; on the other hand, other students found the same pressure valuable and used that pressure to engage in studying. Instruction to increase awareness of self-management strategies seems to be required. Moreover, more information on learning plans and resources should be given to the students. Study logs can be shared by students so that they can discuss their self-management strategies.

## **5. Conclusion**

The results from the course evaluation show that the key factors of the project affecting students' motivation are: meaningful activities, cognitive strategies, social/affective strategies, and student autonomy. As described by the students, a "meaningful" activity has the following characteristics:

1. The activity requires cognitive involvement from them;
2. The activity involves using skills which students feel they can actually use in their academic lives and in their future vocational lives;
3. In the activity, students can use English rather than learn about English.

Data concerning difficulties encountered by the students show that students need supplemental instruction in order to conduct their own projects. Such teaching includes the instruction of learning strategies as

well as that of academic language such as vocabulary, grammatical structures, and discourse skills required to conduct academic tasks (analyzing, synthesizing, informing, explaining, comparing, drawing conclusions, and evaluating). Furthermore, specific instruction in listening is to be included so that students can understand other students' presentations.

The data of the study logs clearly show that there is no correlation between keeping study logs and the enhancement of students' motivation. The data also show that only half of the students can make use of metacognitive strategies. Increasing students' awareness of the importance of metacognitive strategies and teaching students how to use these strategies effectively is required.

Overall, the study shows that learning strategies are closely connected with students' motivation. Meaningful activities which are useful for the students' future lives and through which students can use English should be designed taking students' autonomy into account. Supplemental instruction of academic language and learning strategies to support students when conducting the required activities is necessary.

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