

Reactions of Students to the Use of Content-Based Approach in a Regular Course of English as a General Education Subject

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Abstract

The main foci of the research were to know the attitude of the subjects toward the content-based approach, the use of the grammar translation, and the effects of the approach perceived by the subjects. As the results of the analysis, the use of the content-based approach in the regular English courses in universities was generally welcomed, the contents in the specialized fields were motivating, and the use of the grammar-translation method was accepted where it was necessary.

Introduction

The general attitude and the problems in using the content-based approach in regular English courses in university were investigated by analyzing a questionnaire. The main foci of the research were to know the attitude of the subjects toward the content-based approach, the use of the grammar translation, and group discussion for the comprehension of the contents, the quality of the teacher as a specialist of the contents in the specialized field and the effects of the approach perceived by the subjects. As a teacher of general English courses in a university, choosing themes that are specialized is a matter to be hesitated because of the levels of the contents and the methods restricted by the situation where reading specialized literature should be one of the major part of the class, which often take the method of the Grammar Translation. The use of the Grammar Translation Method also could be problematic because of the lack of the scientific rationale of the effects of the method as Richards, *et.al.* (1986), pointed out and the general impression teachers of English language might have for GTM that depends much on the motivation and the levels of the students for making efforts of reading or translating intensively. The quality of the teacher who takes the content-based approach is of another interest of this study. The merit of content-based approach that takes the form of theme-based approach might be as Brinton, *et.al.* (1989) suggested "The teacher could be enthusiastic enough about the topic to stimulate student interest." The problem would be to what extent the enthusiasm of the teacher motivates his or her students.

Research Method

Method

A questionnaire was given to the subjects after the course of three months of the regular English classes of two different universities.

Subjects

There were three groups of subjects in this study. Two groups of students were in the first year of Keio University majoring in literature and another was in the second year of Tokyo Polytechnic University who were majoring games (TPU). There were 15 students in the first group (Keio 1), 25 in the second group (Keio 2) and 30 in TPU. The members of the two groups of Keio University were in the third level, the first having the highest scores and the fourth the lowest. The levels would be estimated as that of the second grade or pre-first grade of The Step Examination (Eiken) or 600 to 700 points in the TOEIC examination.

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The level of the students of TPU was lower as the third grade of STEP examination or 450 to 500 in the TOEIC examination. The contents dealt with in each class were those of applied linguistics for Keio 1, human behavior for Keio 2 and TPU.

Philosophy of Teaching

The content-based approach was taken. The purposes of the use of that approach were:

- (1) to motivate the students by introducing the specialized field in the level of higher education,
- (2) to provide students with the opportunity of the practical use of English,
- (3) to provide students with the opportunity of immersing in the situation with a lot of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1972)

Syllabus of the course

For Keio 1

Textbooks

The Natural Approach by Krashen (1972)*1, The Language Learning Strategies by Oxford (1985)*2, and Understanding Second Language Acquisition (1985) *3 were mainly read.

Topics were:

- 1) Introduction (1 hour)
- 2) Language Learning Strategies (4 hours)
- 3) Interlanguage (3 hours)
- 4) Language Acquisition Theories (5 hours)

For Keio 2 and TPU

Textbooks

Emotional Intelligence by Goleman (1994)*4, People Watching by Morris (1977)*5, and Human Motivation by Franken (1982) *6 were mainly read.

Topics were:

- 1) Introduction (1 hour)
- 2) Past and Current Issues in Motivation (4 hours)
- 3) Emotion and Human Behavior (4 hours)
- 4) Components of Human Motivation (4 hours)

Results and Discussion

The following are the questionnaire items:

Evaluated on five-point scales having 5 very positive, 4 positive, 3 middle, 2 negative, and 1 very negative.

The reasons are given for each evaluation.

1. Theme of the content-based class

- a) Reading in a specific field
- b) Choice of the theme on “applied linguistics” for the 1st period and “human behavior” for the 2nd period
- c) Request for the theme if any
- d) Discussing the theme over the specialized literatures in an ordinary English course

2. Method

- a) The instructor should explain the contents of the readings in reading comprehension
- b) The instructor should take enough time for the students to discuss on the theme in reading comprehension
- c) The instructor should deal with grammar and vocabulary a lot
- d) The instructor should explain sentences, grammar and vocabulary that are especially complicated and difficult
- e) The instructor should not read aloud and translate
- f) The instructor should translate each sentence very precisely

3. Discussion

- a) Taking longer time for discussion than reading comprehension
- b) Discussing in the Japanese language
- c) Using English in the discussion

4. Audio-visual aids

- a) Use of audio-visual materials
- b) Taking longer time for reading than watching videos
- c) Watching videos and discussing the contents

5. Give comments about Content-Based Approach.

6. Comments about class, *etc.*

7. Any comments.

Table.1 Reaction from the students

Average	1a	1b	1d	2a	2b	2c	2d	2e	2f	3a	3b	3c	4a	4b	4c
KEIO 1	4.3	3.9	3.9	4.1	3.4	3.3	3.9	3.0	2.1	3.9	3.8	3.3	3.8	3.1	3.6
KEIO 2	4.6	4.4	4.0	3.8	3.1	3.1	3.5	2.4	1.9	4.0	4.0	3.5	4.3	3.0	4.0
TPU	4.0	3.8	3.3	3.8	2.7	3.9	4.1	1.7	3.5	3.7	3.6	2.7	4.1	2.7	2.9

1. Theme of the content-based class

- a) Reading in a specific field and b) Choice of the theme on “applied linguistics” for the 1st period and “human behavior” for the 2nd period (TPU had no choice than “human behavior” for their theme.)

There seemed to be no major difference among the group. They were positive about restricting their reading topics in a specific field. As the classes for the students of Keio University were electives and they chose the class according the syllabus shown before the registration, they tend to be positive about the themes. In the case of the students of Tokyo Polytechnic University, they had no chance to choose the theme of the class. There were two students who scored the point of 2, but they did not write about the

reason for the negative idea. One of them wrote, in the next column for the question b, that the difficulty of the English in the reading negatively affected his motivation. The positive ideas among TPU students were such as they liked the theme of human behavior. 20 students, which was 65% of the total number of the students of TPU answered in that way. The theme seemed to be acceptable as a general topic for the students. Some students gave unexpected answers related to the learning of English. The major ones were they changed their attitude toward learning English. In the beginning of the semester they were asked about learning English and about 80 % of the students gave negative answers like they would not like to take English courses if they were not requirements. Examples were “English was difficult but the content was interesting,” “My attitude toward English learning was changed. I enjoyed learning English” and “My focus was on the content and I read English to understand the meaning.” The students of Keio answered more specifically about the preference for the choice of the theme from one specific field. Several students answered that by restricting the theme in one field he could learn vocabulary appeared frequently effectively. Almost all the students of Keio answered that they could focus on the content and learn deeply about the contents in English, which was interesting and effective. This might be attributed to the character of the course being electives. These were the benefits of ESP courses.

c) Request for the theme if any

Referring to the students' comments, the number of the students of TPU who answered they liked human behavior chosen as the topic was 23 out of 31, which was 74%. The others did not give any comment. Again the theme seemed to be generally acceptable for the students who take a regular required English class. In the case of the students of Keio, 12 out of 16 gave positive comments, which was 75%, and 3 gave neutral comments in the first period and 24 out of 27, which was 89% and 3 gave no comment. That again showed the themes were acceptable for English classes.

d) Discussing the theme over the specialized literatures in an ordinary English course

The average scores of this part were 3.1 for Keio 1, 4.0 for Keio 2 and 3.3 for TPU. This result seemed to contradict to the items above. This might be explained by referring to the comments with negative points. In TPU, 8 students pointed out that vocabulary in a specialize field were difficult to find in the dictionary, and 9 students answered the level of English used in the literature was too high to comprehend and some hoped to avoid the specialized literature. In Keio 1, 4 students answered the level of English was too high, and in Keio 2, 6 students mentioned vocabulary and 5 mentioned the level, but the difference was all of them thought these difficulties were positively interpreted as the source of their progress.

2. Method

a) The instructor should explain the contents of the readings in reading comprehension

Comparing the levels of the materials, the ones read in Keio 2 and TPU class were much higher than those of Keio 1 assuming the materials containing technical terms a lot were more difficult to understand. The difference of the level of the materials might affect the difference of 0.3 points in the scores. Evaluating the score of 3.8 or 4.1, the explanation by the instructor might be allowed to a certain extent.

b) The instructor should take enough time for the students to discuss on the theme in reading comprehension

In this question again, the difference could be attributed to the difference of the reading materials. TPU and Keio 2 who read more difficult materials were a little less positive about the discussion part. They wanted their instructor explain the contents of the readings.

c) The instructor should deal with grammar and vocabulary a lot

The results of the difference in the level between the students of Keio University and TPU reflected the difference of the score. The students of Keio 1 and Keio 2 did not need the explanation of grammar and vocabulary by the instructor scoring 3.2 on the average, but those of TPU needed one scoring 3.9.

d) The instructor should explain sentences, grammar and vocabulary that are especially complicated and difficult

The essence of the question seemed the same between the question 2c and 2d, but the nuance was 2d specified the contents as ones that were more difficult and need the explanation by the instructor. This one reflects the relation between the level and the score.

e) The instructor should not read aloud and translate

The score seemed to change according to the level of the students and the difficulty of the materials here, too and there were the largest differences among the groups. There were 4 students who wrote that they wanted the instructor to translate the reading materials in Keio 1, 14 in Keio 2, and 18 in TPU.

f) The instructor should translate each sentence very precisely

The level of the students seemed to matter. The students of Keio University did not need the analysis of each sentence to translate scoring 2.0 on the average and ones of TPU needed one scoring 3.5.

3. Discussion

a) Taking longer time for discussion than reading comprehension

The majority of the subjects seemed to prefer the discussion part of the lecture than the reading comprehension part in this question about the general preference for the organization of the class. As was discussed the schedule might be affected by the level of the students and the difficulty of the materials. Some students of Keio 1 and 2 explained that the contents were so interesting that they wanted to know a lot more about the field and for that purpose, taking a lot of time for reading was equally important.

b) Discussing in the Japanese language

The majority of the subjects preferred the use of Japanese in the discussion. Some students of Keio 1 and 2 pointed out the contents were too difficult to discuss in a foreign language and other students described they did not have linguistic competence enough to express the nuance of the contents. The positive idea about the use of English was they just wanted to try it.

c) Using English in the discussion

Then what were the reasons for the negative attitude to use English in the discussion. In the case of the students of Keio 1 and 2, the major reasons were they thought they did not have enough competence in discussing in English and they wanted to focus on meaning by speaking in the native language. The positive reasons were they thought speaking in English will improve their English and they just wanted to

try discussing in English. In the case of the students of TPU, they described the same reasons for both of the attitudes but some told that they just could not speak English at all.

4. Audio-visual aids

a) Use of audio-visual materials

The majority of the students preferred the use of videos that help to facilitate the comprehension of the reading materials scoring 4.1.

b) Taking longer time for reading than watching videos

The average score of this question was 2.9 and that was lower than those of other questions.

c) Watching videos and discussing the contents

There was 1.1 difference between Keio 2 and TPU. Both of the groups watched the same video in that semester. The reason for the difference could not be inferred from the research materials.

5. Give comments about Content-Based Approach.

Following are the comments from the students of Keio 1:

Positive comments

Discussion was good for learning but some more explanation by the instructor was necessary. (1)

The teaching style was new and interesting. (2)

The teaching style was new and interesting, but I wonder this method is effective for language learning. (1)

Good. (1)

I like the teaching method. (1)

The style was helpful for me. (1)

Learning about the specialized area in the stage of general education was good for me. (1)

The group discussion and the presentation were fun and very effective. (1)

We had a lot of opportunity to speak in public and could have communication with the instructor. (1)

It was tough but more effective than just reading textbooks. (1)

Negative comment

The students were not enthusiastic enough. (1)

Keio 2

Positive comments

This class was better than any other classes. (1)

This class is no boring, fun and very much satisfying. (1)

I can learn other people's opinion and that is very good. I will try to present my idea a lot in the next semester. (1)

We had discussion along with reading. This is active and good. I will try to contribute to the discussion in the next semester. (1)

It did not seem like an English class, but the contents were interesting and discussion facilitated comprehension. (1)

The style fits the contents. (1)

Discussing to get to the true meaning of the events or stories was meaningful for university students. We knew the broader view through the discussion with classmates. (1)

Discussing in the specialized field is good and we could share the information each other. (1)

Very good. (3)

I have no objection. (1)

We could share our idea and it was fun. (2)

The discussion facilitated reading comprehension, which motivated me a lot. (1)

We can make friends and the class is fun. (1)

We can make friends and the class is fun. I feel free to discuss without stress among the friends. (3)

The videos were helpful to understand the contents. (1)

I was active in the class and was different from the style taken in the high school. I enjoyed studying in a higher education of university. (3)

It was very interesting and fun. I will make my best effort in the next semester. (1)

Negative comments

I don't think my English is improving. (1)

Discussing in English would be much more fun. (1)

Sometimes we spoke about something unrelated to the theme but which was fun. (1)

TPU

Positive comments

I felt free from the stress of translation. The explanation about the contents by the instructor was helpful for the final check of the meaning of the paragraphs. (1)

I had the least stress of English classes and I enjoyed the class, which was good. (1)

This was new and fun. (2)

I like this one and I begin to favor English classes. (1)

I could understand the contents and I had a lot of opportunity to think about the contents myself and was fun. (1)

In this style, everyone can join the class discussion and is very good. I don't like translating readings. (1)

The style was new and I was worried at first, but the class was fun. (1)

This class does not seem like an English class, but I feel at ease. (1)

This class is not like traditional ones and I can understand English better there. (1)

This class is better than the ones taught at the high school. (3)

I learned the contents. (1)

This style fits me. (1)

This is better than a translation oriented style. (1)

Reading the materials and discussing were effective. (1)

Negative comments

I remember the contents a lot, but I don't think I will become able to speak English learning in this class. (1)

I wonder I was improving my English. (1)

This is good to learn the contents and I have to focus on English, too. (1)

I don't see any difference from reading a textbook. (1)

It was fun, but I am not sure I can learn English. (1)

6. Comments about class, *etc.*

The general impression about the class was asked by Question 6 and 7.

Keio 1

Positive comments

The contents were a little too difficult but the group works were effective. (1)

Very good. Thank you. (1)

This really is a good class. I love the atmosphere. (1)

Language acquisition theories were profound and interesting. I will read books in the summer vacation. (1)

I had a good experience of learning in university not in high school. I am interested in linguistics. (1)

Teacher was kind. The class was interesting and I enjoy the class every week. I will do my best in the exam. (1)

The class was difficult but I had a lot of friends in this class. (1)

The instructor of this English class is relaxing and enjoyable. (1)

Negative comments

There was not a negative comment here.

Productive comments

Reading assignment should be given and checked for the discussion being activated. (1)

Knowledge of applied linguistics learned in the class could be tried for practical uses. (1)

The tasks and contents were interesting and I will more actively contribute to the class. (1)

Keio 2

Positive comments

The level of the reading contents was high, but the reading and discussing was fun. The teacher's praise when I gave a presentation as a representative of the group motivated me a lot. (1)

The contents are interesting. You look good! (1)

I enjoyed the discussion in groups. (1)

I am happy in this university. This is really different from a high school. (1)

I am very interested in the theme and I am always looking for the next class. (1)

The class was just fun! I was always looking for the next class. I will do my best in the fall semester, too.

The teacher was so kind. He was so good at explaining. I was very happy I could register this class. I would like to continue studying in this field next year and hope to major human behavior for my thesis. (1)

The specialized materials were hard for me but the contents were interesting and fun. (2)

The class was difficult but very interesting. I want to have reading assignments. (1)

I spent a very fruitful time with the respectable friends and the teacher. Writing assignments gave me a good opportunity to improve my writing. I would like to know about various aspects of human behavior and looking forward to the fall semester. (1)

Very good. I want the same style of the class in the fall semester, too. (1)

I was happy to know the opinion of others. I want the same style of the class in the fall semester, too. (1)

Very good. Fun!! Videos were really exciting. (1)

I am interested in psychology. The teacher has a sense of humor and I am always looking forward to Tuesdays. (1)

The teacher's very interesting talk and good contents interested me very much. I would like to be more active in the next semester. (1)

This is an English class, but discussing in Japanese is good. I want the unit. "C" would be appreciated. (1)

I am happy I had new good friends in this class. (1)

The theme was quite new to me and was good. (1)

I enjoyed the discussion. The Teacher's jokes were good! (1)

I enjoyed the class. Thank you very much. (1)

I am looking forward to the fall semester. (1)

The class management and the contents were quite satisfying. The special lecture about the academic skills was useful. I am looking forward to the fall semester. Thank you. (1)

The experience of contributing the class was new to me and was very good. I really enjoyed learning in a university. The discussion and the videos were fun. (1)

Very very fun! The contents were quite interesting. I will do my best in the next semester, too. I really enjoyed the class, I thank you very much! (1)

This really was a class, available only in the university. It was really interesting. I was interested in the syllabus and the class was as good as I expected. (1)

Productive comments

The explanation was comprehensible enough and enjoyable. I would like to be more active in the discussion. (1)

Negative comments

Reading assignment was not always directly related to the discussion in the classes. It demotivates me. (1)

The materials were very interesting, deep and fun. The figures and tables on the materials were helpful. I needed some more space on the reading materials to take notes of the lecture. (1)

TPU

Positive comments

The class was very good. I regret I was absent from the class a few times. I enjoyed the class. (1)

I thought the class was worth taking. (1)

I could learn English and contents. It was a good experience. (2)

The teacher's talk was interesting. I am looking forward to the next semester. (1)

The theme was interesting, but English was difficult. The explanation by the teacher was comprehensible enough. The examples and episodes introduced by the teacher were very interesting. (2)

The theme was interesting, but English was difficult. I hope my English is good enough to enjoy the class fully. (1)

The examples and episodes introduced by the teacher were more interesting than the contents. (1)

I like the class. It is good. (1)

I was relaxed in the class because I did not like learning English. (1)

The class was comprehensible because of the style. Do not change the style. (2)

This really was a class, available only in the university. It was a good method. I am looking forward to the next semester. (1)

This class was better than the ones I took in the first year. (1)

The class was comprehensible even for me who was not good at English. I am looking forward to the next semester. (1)

Human behavior was an interesting theme. (1)

I could study at my own pace. (1)

Negative comments

The contents were too difficult. The easier one would be fine for me. (1)

There were so many articles and I often was lost. I want the materials set as a book or something. I would prefer a cartoon such as “Courage the Dog.” (1)

English is difficult anyway. (1)

Difficult. (1)

Productive comments

I wanted to watch some more videos. (2)

Having the class in the second period was too hard for me. (1)

I could not follow the class. The teacher spoke, too fast. (1)

To summarize the points of comments, many students welcomed the approach and seemed to enjoy the classes, but the negative and the productive comments gave some idea about the revision of the techniques or methods. For example, the use of reading assignments for the preparation for the next discussion should be dealt with following the schedule whenever it is possible. This might help the students to participate more actively in the discussion.

Conclusion

As the results of the analysis show, the use of the content-based approach in the regular English courses in universities was generally welcomed, the contents in the specialized fields were motivating, and the use of the grammar-translation method was accepted where it was necessary. The other findings from the study are:

- 1) These facts might suggest that grouping students according to the preference for the theme dealt with in the class would be one of the good procedure to organize English courses.
- 2) The level of reading materials affects the method. When the level of materials is high, students needs the explanation on the contents by instructors and when the level is moderate or low, they prefer discussion as a major part of the organization of the class. The same thing could apply to the teaching of grammar and vocabulary. The students in the lower-level need more assistance by instructors and will have less opportunity of discussing among students.
- 3) The results under the category of the use of audio-visual aids, there were some interesting ones, but the reasons for the results could not be inferred for the lack of the data of the research. The comments from the students should have been gathered.

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Notes

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- *6 Robert. E. Franken. (1982). *Human Motivation*. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company. This book is written according to the idea of componential approach to human motivation. The theory explains human activity is explicable in terms of three aspects such as "biological", "cognitive", and "learned" factors. This book mediates fields such as psychology, neurology, behaviorism, etc., which separately deals with the human motivation (Tanabe 2004) .