

Interpretation of the Goals of the Tasks by the Learners in the Classes Based on the Content-Based Approach

Hiroshi TANABE*

Abstract

The main foci of the research were to know the attitude of the subjects toward the content-based approach, the use of group discussion and the effects of the approach perceived by the subjects. As the results of the analyses showed, in order to make a content-based classroom effective, the learners' interest in the contents should be the precondition in addition to the understanding of the philosophy and procedure of the class by the students. As a content-based classroom in regular English courses would be their first experience, where they are forced to learn English implicitly by discussing the contents of the topics set without being explained the grammar or structure of the target language as are expected in the usual English classes, some students would feel stressed. The teacher of a content-based classroom should be very careful about this point and explain about the philosophy and the procedure of the approach when necessary.

Introduction

In the study by Tanabe (2008), the general attitude and the problems in using the content-based approach in regular English courses in a university were investigated by analyzing a questionnaire. As the results of the analysis, the use of the content-based approach in the regular English courses in universities was found generally welcomed, the contents in the specialized fields were motivating, and the use of the grammar-translation method was accepted where it was necessary.

In this paper the same questionnaire was used with the same contents and the format to compare the results for the subjects who took the courses for 2 semesters in 2011 and those who took the same courses for 1 semester in 2012. The main foci of the research were to know 1) the interpretation of the goals of the tasks by the learner in the classes based on a content-based approach, 2) the attitude of the subjects toward the content-based approach, and 3) the interpretation of the group work as a main procedure of comprehending reading the contents.

Method

Two types of questionnaires were given to the students who were taking the regular English course at Keio University. The first one was given in the first class in 2012, just after the philosophy and the approach and the method of the classes and the introduction of the syllabus were explained, in which the basic motive of choosing the class was asked. The second one was given at the last class of the same two classes in 2011 and after the first semester in 2012. These results were compared with the results in 2008 for the discussion. The major difference of the classes in 2011 and 2012 was the use of group work for comprehending the contents of the courses in 2012, which was not at all used in one class in 2011.

* Associate Professor, General Education and Research Center, Tokyo Polytechnic University
Received Sept. 14, 2012

Table.1 Basic condition of each group

	Approach	Method	Contents	Level
2011(After 1 year)				
Class1	content-based	group work	applied linguistics	intermediate
Class2	content –based	lecture	human behavior	intermediate
2012 (After 1 semester)				
Class1	content-based	group work	applied linguistics	intermediate
Class2	content –based	group work	human behavior	intermediate

Subjects

There were four groups of subjects in this study. All the groups of students were in the first year of Keio University majoring in literature and the level was intermediate according to the criteria of the faculty of letters of Keio university. The first two groups were the students who took the regular English course in 2011 and the other two were who took the equivalent courses in 2012.

There were 25 students in Class 1 and 27 in Class 2 in 2011. The levels of the students could be estimated in the second grade or pre-first grade of The Step Examination (Eiken) or 500 to 600 points in the TOEIC examination. The contents dealt with in each class were those of applied linguistics for Class 1 and human behavior for Class 2.

Table 2. Subjects

Number	
2011(After 1 year)	
Class1	25
Class2	27
2012(Initial questionnaire)	
Class1	14
Class2	27
2012 (After 1 semester)	
Class1	24
Class2	25

The Followings are the contents of the questionnaire:

Initial questionnaire in 2012

1. What do you want to learn in this class?
2. Which skills do you want to improve?
3. Requests for the class procedure
4. Requests for the textbooks or materials
5. Requests for evaluation
6. What were the best methods for learning English for you?
7. What were the worst methods for learning English for you?

Questionnaire given in 2011 and 2012 after 1 year or 1 semester

(Each item was scored in 10 points as 10 most agreeable and 1 least agreeable)

1. Is this approach effective for improving your English ability?
Reasons:
2. Did you have an interest in the specific contents?
Reasons:
3. Did the case-studies work for raising your interest in the theories?
Reasons:
4. What do you expect for the teacher in this approach? And what is the student's role in this approach?
5. Was the level of the materials appropriate for you?
Reasons:
6. Was the use of audio-visual materials effective?
In what ways?
7. What do you think of using English as a medium of communication in the class?
Reasons:
8. What do you think of the evaluation according to the reports rather than the exams?
Reasons:
9. What do you think of evaluating your participation in the class?
Reasons:
10. Did you learn the technical terms in the specific field?
Reasons:
11. Did you learn the contents of the specific field dealt with in the class?
Reasons:
12. Did you learn the English expressions in the academic field?
Reasons:
13. Were you interested in the specific field dealt with in this class?
Reasons:
14. Do you want to continue studying in the field?
Reasons:

Philosophy of Teaching

The philosophy, the approach, the method and the content were the same as those of the research in 2008. The followings are the same contents shown in Tanabe (2008).

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 Class 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 Class 2

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

Q1. Is this approach effective for improving your English ability?

	Class 1 (S=24)	Class 2 (S=25)	Total
1 semester	7.28	6.52	6.89
1 year	7.30	8.11	7.73
			+ 0.84

After the learning experience in the content-based classes the improvement in the points of Class 2 by 1.59 was a lot larger than the one in Class 1 by 0.02. As was described in Class 1 the main procedure of Class 1 depended on the lecture. This result did not seem to support the assumption that a group work would be interpreted effective for English learning by the learners. In the case of Class 1, the initial point was higher by 0.76 comparing with that of Class 2. This might mean that group work was interpreted favorable from the early stage of the course and that tendency lasted after the whole year.

Q2. Did you have an interest in the specific contents?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	8.21	7.72	7.96
1 year	8.57	8.54	8.55
		+0.59	

Most of the students chose the classes at their will, but some students were forced to join the classes by the administrator of the faculty of letters of Keio University, which meant a few students did not like or were not interested in the specific contents. The general tendency found in that questionnaire item was that

after the lecture on human behavior 0.82 point was developed in average, and even though there was only a little increase by 0.36 in the average in Class 1, the initial score was high enough by 8.21. This could be interpreted the subjects maintained the interest in the contents of applied linguistics for 1 year in the high level.

Q3. Did the case-studies work for raising your interest in the theories?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	N/A	6.64	6.64
1 year	N/A	8.42	8.42
		+1.78	

For the sections of “arousal level and behavioral change” and “arousal level and selective attention”, case-studies were discussed, the cases were about a young man and a woman who met on a campus and looked at each other for a while and a woman who was in danger of losing her way in a rough area of a big city, which were exciting. The students discussed only in this part in 2012 and interestingly some students pointed out in the questionnaire that frequent uses of the discussion were necessary to prepare the mental setting for speaking among students in a group. Some students hesitated speaking actively in the group.

Q4. What do you expect for the teacher in this approach? And what is the students’ role in this approach?

The most interesting answer to this item was from Class 1 in 2011 and the subject said that students should believe the effect of a content-based class and actively participate in the discussion. Three subjects answered positive attitude to learn in the class in Class3 in 2011. One student in Class 2 in 2012 answered the students should evaluate the approach in the long run and another answered forget about the past learning experience and try the new approach. From these answers, a content-based approach was a new experience for the students, so teachers and students should share the philosophy and the procedure of the class.

Q5. Was the level of the materials appropriate for you?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	5.12	5.41	5.27
1 year	5.56	6.63	6.13
		+0.86	

The contents of each class seemed to be evaluated appropriate for the students.

Q6. Was the use of audio-visual materials effective?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	N/A	N/A	N/A
1 year	6.70	8.23	7.51

The difference between the two classes came from the contents of the videos. One experiment on the first language acquisition was shown in Class one in 2011. The video was made in 1972 and the image was

monochrome. The content was instructive but required careful attention on trivial movement of the body parts of babies and their mothers. More than half of the students slept during the video in Class 1. In Class 2, several videos from new sources were shown which includes the analyses of human behavior in a variety program on TV.

Q7. What do you think of using English as a medium of communication in the class?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	6.16	6.52	6.34
1 year	6.72	5.72	6.19
		-0.15	

In Class 1 where applied linguistics was the topic, a little increase in the point was found. In Class 2, as the contents were widened and deepen, they might wonder if they could follow the contents if the main language in the class was English.

Q8. What do you think of the evaluation according to the reports rather than the exams?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	7.90	7.52	7.70
1 year	7.95	8.04	8.00
		+0.3	

Reports for the course evaluation were more preferred to exams. Some students answered they preferred reports because they wanted to learn academic writing. In the class, the discourse of the academic reports and several approach to planning the construction of the paragraphs such as branching notes were introduced in all the classes. This might influence the results.

Q9. What do you think of evaluating your participation in the class?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	6.13	7.92	7.04
1 year	6.74	6.33	6.52
		-0.52	

The evaluation by the participation in the class was not strongly rejected but many students pointed out that they were shy and the characteristic difference should not affect the evaluation. Some other students insisted participation should be included for the total evaluation of the course because speaking in public was a very important training for them.

Q10. Did you learn the technical terms of the specific field dealt with in the class?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	7.49	7.48	7.71
1 year	8.48	8.04	8.44
		+0.73	

In both of the classes, they answered they learned the technical terms of the specific fields of applied

linguistics and human behavior. Some students pointed out they learned a lot of technical terms because the teacher explained the meaning of them each time they appear and those terms repeatedly appeared in readings and discussion.

Q11. Did you learn the contents of the specific field dealt with in the class?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	7.40	7.35	7.37
1 year	8.17	7.81	7.98
		+0.61	

Even though the improvement of the score seemed not large, the students evaluated this item highly from the beginning to the last. Many students gave positive comments such as they could learn the specific field in English and they could learn English in a specific field for a long period of time and that was a new experience for them. Some students pointed out that contents themselves were difficult to understand. If they felt the contents were too difficult, it might cause the difficulty in learning English, too. The teachers of a content-based classroom should be careful of the level of the materials. To this problem, as Krashen (1983) pointed out, materials might include linguistic contents in many levels, and they have a lot of appropriate levels of linguistic contents and which would cause language acquisition.

And as Ellis, 1985 insisted, scaffolding in many forms would help learners to understand the linguistic contents and a content-based classroom would be rich in comprehensible inputs in that sense.

Q12. Did you learn the English expressions in the academic field?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	8.08	7.00	7.53
1 year	6.96	8.15	7.59
		+0.06	

In Class 1, one student pointed out that he focused only on the contents and never thought of learning academic expressions during the course. As the effects of learning in the content-based classroom upon the grammar or the structure of the target language were expected implicitly acquired (*c.f.* Ellis, 1985). The expected results resulting from implicit learning in a content-based classroom should be explained to the students.

Q13. Were you interested in the specific field dealt with in this class?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	7.83	7.04	7.43
1 year	8.13	8.30	8.22
		+0.79	

This item was one of the most highly evaluated by the students. As was explained many students chose the contents except for some students, they liked the contents from the beginning. What should be carefully observed was how they maintain their interest and how a teacher of a content-based classroom helped in this point.

Q14. Do you want to continue studying in the field?

	Class 1	Class 2	Total
1 semester	6.26	6.75	6.51
1 year	6.22	7.85	7.10
		+0.57	

The students in Class 2 evaluated higher than those in Class 1. Some students commented that more and more they knew about Applied Linguistics they realized the difficulty of the contents in the field.

Conclusion

The item 13“Were you interested in the specific field dealt with in this class?” was one of the most highly evaluated by the students. As was explained, many students chose the contents by themselves except for some students who were forced to join the class by the administrator of the department of letters of Keio University, they liked the contents from the beginning. What should be carefully observed was how they maintained their interest and how a teacher of a content-based classroom helped in this point. To this question needs assessment, which were the main focus of this investigation were very important. The effects of the approach on the language acquisition, the choice of the contents, teacher and student roles, the level of the materials including AV aids, and the form of evaluation were listed as the clues to the question. In a future study, the reconsideration about the list of questionnaire items might be necessary to improve the teaching contents including syllabi , teaching methods, and teaching techniques.

References

- [1] Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Krashen, S., & Terrell, T. (1983). *The Natural Approach*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- [3] Richards, C J., & Rodgers, S T. (1986). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching:a description and analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Tanabe, H. (2004). “Student Understanding of the Philosophy of Content Based Approach in a General English Course”. *The Academic Reports of Engineering Tokyo Polytechnic University* Vol.27.No.2 pp. 1-17
- [5] Tanabe, H.(2008). “Reactions of Students to the Use of Content-Based Approach in a Regular Course of English as a General Education Subject” . *The Academic Reports of Engineering Tokyo Polytechnic University* Vol.31.No.2 pp. 9-19

Notes

Lists related to the syllabi for 2011 and 2012 classes in Reference were from Tanabe 2008 as the syllabi and the contents of the courses reported in this paper was the same with those of the courses introduced in 2008.

1. Krashen, S., & Terrell, T. (1983). *The Natural Approach*. New York: Prentice Hall.
2. Oxford L, R. (1990). *The Language Learning Strategies: what every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House.
3. Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Goleman, D. (1994). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
5. Morris, D. (1977). *People Watching*. California: Random House.

6. Franken, E R. (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) .