

# The Teaching of Advanced Reading and Writing Skills: A Content-Based Approach in a Teachers License Language Program

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## Abstract

Language acquisition, first or second, is a mysterious blend of social and individual processes. But second language acquisition is especially dependent on individual, often lonely, effort. At the same time language is intrinsically social and its effective mastery is highly sensitive to the affective dimension and usually greatly helped by emotional support from teachers, advisors and peers. This is especially true of a group-oriented society like Japan and of a teacher's license program in a typical Japanese University like Tsuru University. Therefore, in the teaching of Advanced Reading and Writing, a content-based approach based on the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) would be very appropriate for students who aim to become teachers in

elementary, junior high and high schools in Japan. The Advanced Reading and Writing course we propose to implement in this innovative educational program will begin with a great deal of traditional language instruction in reading and writing, but it will end at the mid and upper levels with a very strong emphasis on content, including simulated academic classes with lectures, note-taking, the writing of papers, and examinations of content. At the same time, there will be a very strong attention not merely to the product of these endeavors (grades and test scores) but the process of understanding what students did well and what they need more work on, including self-awareness or metacognitive awareness in evaluating their own learning. We strongly believe that implementing the teaching of reading and writing through the lens of content-based learning and placing *gengogaku* or language education at the center of the English language teacher license curriculum would make the students become better and effective teachers themselves.

## Introduction

If one can generalize about the most sweeping development in second-language instruction over the past two or three decades, one must point to an increasing use of content-based instruction in language programs, especially for more advanced students (Kasper, 2000, Davies, 2003, Stoller, 2004, DelliCarpini and Alonso, 2013). Although content-based instruction is not always recognized for what it is, the principle that language is best learned through *using and doing things* in the target language, has scarcely been challenged in modern language

instruction. That is, language is not primarily acquired through the learning of the grammar rules and vocabulary items--items disassociated from content. Taking this principle a step further, it is certainly no surprise that students who have learned a language primarily for the purpose of passing a traditional proficiency test, like TOEFL, or an Entrance Exam typical of the Central *nyushi* in Japan, find that their scores—even very high ones—very often do not predict their ability to function well in the language of the typical university classroom. Sometimes the very best students flounder when confronted with the reality of academic English as it is really used in lectures, textbook readings and writing academic papers. Activities seemingly so basic as informal small group discussions can seem painfully awkward, even for students with high proficiency exam scores on standardized tests that purport to reflect the ability to function successfully in academic settings.

Hence in recent decades there has been a marked shift from the exclusive focus on skills and discrete point language items (grammar rules, vocabulary etc.), toward the acquisition and processing of information, critical thinking skills, and deliberate focus on cognitive operations (logical connections, inferential assumptions, entailment, categorization, and personal responses) in so-called “authentic” (unabridged) academic texts (cf. DelliCarpini and Alonso, 2013). By “texts,” we are referring not merely to written discourse but also to oral discourse organized in the well-known rhetorical forms that have descended from the ancient Greeks’ cross-disciplinary

curricula; literature, rhetoric (i.e., formal essay composition), mathematics, hard and natural sciences, philosophy, the arts and music. One of the several language learning approaches that embrace explicitly the focus on cognitive operations through a study of academic content is CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach), championed by such scholars as Amar Uhl Chamot and J. Michael O’Malley. Works like *A Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach: An ESL Content-Based Curriculum (1986)* bases language instruction materials and methods on a cognitive model of learning that is more focused on what goes on in students’ minds during the learning process rather than merely overt responses to stimuli--that is, it goes beyond at the surface level behavior of students’ language use in the classroom setting. This cognitive approach to language learning and teaching is deeply informed by such renowned psychologists’ work on learning as Bruner, Piaget, and Vygotsky, who viewed learning as far more complex, internal, active and creative than a behaviorist model of learning as essentially a process of stimulus/response (Skinner, 1957). Indeed, Noam Chomsky’s famous refutation of this model and its corollaries in audio-visual models of language learning, forever tossed this view of how language is acquired into the dustbins of history (Chomsky, 1959.) But outside the fields of language learning and teaching, such naïve views still persist among otherwise well-educated academics.

### **Content-Based Language Instruction as a Bridge between Language Focus and**

## **Content Focus in the teaching of Advanced Reading and Writing**

There is not time here to go into the specific roots of CALLA and content-based language instruction, but for our present purposes, it is more effective to present the implications of this approach to the English language teaching curriculum and the central role of bilingual language acquisition in the Program. Put simply, the teaching approach will stress the learning of language through the learning and intensive practice of a rich and varied subject matter. Moreover, there will also be the continued instruction of language features themselves (grammar, vocabulary, usage etc.). Let it also be noted that the same basic principles hold for students studying in their native language, in the sense that introductory classes in each new discipline have very close parallels with the early stages of language learning in that both involve the acquisition of vocabulary and cognitive structures for understanding and communicating about the concepts of a new language in fields like chemistry, sociology and economics.

As already should be clear, the English language teacher license curriculum places great emphasis on students being exposed to a wide variety of introductory courses in different disciplines. Learning takes place through the active process of *making meaning* in the language/subject matter classroom.

But exactly what is “content-based instruction” as opposed to a more traditional language learning approach? The difference lies primarily not in the *nature or even content* of the learning but

in the *degree of emphasis* on matters of language and matters of content. There is never a point in the process of learning a language that one can be devoid of content, and conversely in our English-medium instruction throughout the program, there can never be a point in which the instructional process of the rich and varied disciplines is devoid of considerable attention to language: its comprehension as well as its expression, in reading and writing.

## **The Role of the Instructor in the Content-Based Approach to Teaching**

The Instructor will provide guidance and materials not merely for language study but also for content study for advanced students in the Reading and Writing Course.

The emphasis is meta-cognitive awareness of their own study needs, their methods and their learning processes. One of the goals is to produce independent learners, which is also one of the pillars of our missions, to produce independent, self-motivating learners and thinkers.

The Writing assignments assigned by the instructor would aim at providing the student-teachers with the intellectual tools for academic communication at the highest levels. So not only are students going into other courses with sufficient linguistic coping skills, they are moving along the language acquisition continuum referred to above with extensive content-based instruction in every course they enroll in, as well as continual guidance on the meta-cognitive aspects of expressing what they have learned through the multiple

perspectives they receive in the various disciplines to which they are exposed in the Reading and Writing course.

So, explicitly, what exactly are the parallels between content-based language learning programs or CALLA and the Advanced Reading and Writing course we propose to implement in this innovative educational program? Our course will begin with a great deal of traditional language instruction in reading and writing, but it will end at the mid and upper levels with a very strong emphasis on content, including simulated academic classes with lectures, note-taking, the writing of papers, and examinations of content. At the same time, there will be a very strong attention not merely to the product of these endeavors (grades and test scores) but the process of understanding what students did well and what they need more work on, including self-awareness or metacognitive awareness in evaluating their own learning.

When these students progress through the course, they would do so at a more advanced level and with a much greater emphasis on content-based learning in their course work, for example, economics, sociology, mathematics etc. At the same time, they are still required to reflect upon and develop their use of language, most formally through their writings, but also informally through the advising meetings with their instructors. Furthermore, copies of all textbooks used on the course would be kept in the departmental library for convenient reference.

After all, even with native speakers learning any new discipline, the process is

quite similar to learning second language in some important respects: they must learn the “language” or vocabulary of the new discipline, which involves the learning and use of concepts of that discipline and gradually the kinds of cognitive operations one must master to understand what philosophers do and how they think when they do philosophy and what economists do and how they think when they do economics, and so forth, for sociologists, historians, mathematicians etc. The differences in language learning and other disciplines lie in matters of degree—not matters of content, nor in the fundamental processes students go through in learning something new. To put it in a simpler form, we can see the following pictures as far as the teaching of reading and writing goes:

### **Specific Learning Goals**

Goals: not simply to improve reading and writing skills, but also to raise students’ awareness of how to teach these skills.

- Elementary, junior high, high  
Group tasks might include making plans for actual lessons that can be presented in class. In other words, get students to imagine themselves teaching actual classes. Given the age and maturity of our students, it might well be suitable for them to plan Reading & Writing classes to be taught to elementary school students. Students might, for example, be directed to plan and collaboratively present an “all-English” class. This might have a grammatical focus or a topic focus.

Examples:

1. Work together to plan and present an “all-English” class for elementary students. Your goal is to show the difference between simple present and simple past tense, and get the other students to carry out written practice activities. All the members of your group should participate equally in the presentation and you should be ready to answer questions about your presentation.
  - c. How could you help them to talk to each other in a more friendly way?
  - d. How would you explain this argument to a class of elementary school students?
2. Work together to plan and present an “all-English” class for elementary school students. Your goal is to offer a simple, clear written explanation of certain cultural differences observable around the world, and get students to write about these. All the members of your group should participate equally in the presentation and you should be ready to answer questions about your presentation.
  - Fundamentals of English language teaching
- Broadly communicative, content-based methodology

The overriding goal is to get students to use English in a meaningful way, even if the focus of the class is grammatical. In this regard, not only authentic text, but also musical and video sources may be employed in order to generate reading and writing activities.

Examples:

1. Read this transcript of two American people arguing about race. Work together and write answers to the following:
    - a. Describe the people in the video.
    - b. Why are they arguing?
- While the lesson is geared to getting students to read content and write their own ideas, it is fundamentally important that the teacher also presents content skillfully. In addition, the teacher should be monitoring and assessing the students' efforts carefully and learning from the experience. In other words, the teacher should also be learning from the experience of getting students to learn and the act of monitoring and assessing the students is expected to help the teacher to become a better presenter of material.
- Practical expertise
- Students should be engaged in communicative activities and working to express themselves while reading and writing in the English language. With regard to a Reading & Writing course, this implies that the teacher must take care to introduce practical work clearly and effectively, leading to activities that help students develop the target skills. For

students who are prospective teachers, appropriate activities might include working collaboratively to devise lesson plans for younger students. Writing clearly and simply so that younger learners can understand sophisticated material is expected to raise awareness in our students and help them to develop effective writing skills. Group tasks that get students to write classroom material for themselves provides a direct link between classes at Tsuru and practical experience of teacher training.

- Motivation and independent learning  
Ultimately, getting the students interested in the class content and getting them to enjoy communicative activities is going to be more important than methodology. Making use of attractive musical content, for example, can help to make reading activities more enjoyable and relevant. Enjoyable reading input can be tailored to enjoyable and stimulating writing and presentation activities. Even so, motivation is not all about having fun. Careful monitoring and assessment by the teacher probably remains the most powerful motivational force available in the classroom. By the same token, careful assessment of students' work is extremely important in driving effective independent learning outside the classroom.

- Current affairs  
In order to maximize the relevance of listening input, the teacher is very likely to make use of video resources available online. Such materials are topical and provide an insight into the reality of events in Japan and elsewhere. Students are able to access such materials on their own handheld devices, making it easy for teachers to set up reading and writing

activities. Students should be encouraged to watch and listen to videos in which controversial issues are being discussed, and then work collaboratively in order to plan and make written presentations on these topics. Students might well be encouraged to use PowerPoint in order to make an effective written/oral presentation, for example. A natural extension of such activities for prospective teachers is to plan how to explain, simply and clearly, such sophisticated material to young learners.

- Intercultural/multicultural awareness  
In a complex, multilayered and diverse society, cultural challenges are common, especially in the classroom. Having intercultural skills is fundamental to teachers who work with a diverse group of students, as a teacher's professional attitude towards diversity in the classroom will positively influence and affect the students in all aspects of their lives. The goals of Tsuru University Teaching Program are to redefine and expand the role of English teacher in terms of diversity, train teachers in understanding methods and concepts of intercultural education in a multicultural society, and promote mutual respect and understanding among cultures. To this end, a Reading & Writing course should remain sensitive to problems involving communication across races and cultures. In particular, *our* students should be given opportunities to think about how to get *their* students to think about related issues.

Skills and Learning Goals	Materials & Activities
1. Improve reading	Graded readers DVDs (subtitles) online; English Central; Rosetta Stone; Self-Study Reading Materials
2. Improve writing	Stimulating Writing Textbooks; Writing Center; Online English Central; Self-Study Writing Materials

required for all other classes is a culmination of the student's combined knowledge from lectures, readings, and critical thinking about each course they enroll in. In this way, the language focus and content focus are perfectly merged not only in the senior thesis but also in all the papers along the way that will form each student's portfolio.

Language acquisition, first or second, is a mysterious blend of social and individual processes. But second language acquisition is especially dependent on individual, often lonely, effort. At the same time language is intrinsically social and its effective mastery is highly sensitive to the affective dimension and usually greatly helped by emotional support from teachers, advisors and peers. This is especially true of a group-oriented society like Japan. So it is vital that the materials and activities of the course are all located on site and not in other facilities or via online access from some other location. The very presence of other students working together or separately in the same location with help from instructor is critical to the progress of the students.

### Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum

Although Writing Across the Curriculum is the best recognized term arising from writing initiatives supported in the 1980s by writing experts like William Zinsser (*Writing Well*, 1976; *Writing to Learn*, 1993) to enhance native-language writing skills in American universities, it more accurately represents Language Across the Curriculum. The Advanced Reading and Writing course at Tsuru University is not merely about writing but about everything the student experiences in an out of the classroom setting that allows him or her to write the series of research papers stipulated in other courses. The combination of traditional research papers in the student's chosen courses with reflection papers (and perhaps others)

### Conclusion

The previous pages outlined a way of viewing the teaching of reading and writing through the lens of content-based learning and provided an explanation and rationale for placing *gengogaku* or language education at the center of the English language teacher license curriculum. It is the main unifying element throughout the program regardless of where the student begins study. It is important to understand that content-based

instruction as it is defined here is not unique to this course but has a tradition of more than two decades and draws from research in cognitive psychology, linguistics, going back to the mid-twentieth century and liberal arts curricula that arose in Athens, Greece in the fifth century BC, when the study of rhetoric was explicitly the merging of language and content in the writing of elegant prose and poetry.

What *is* new about this course is the unique blending of these traditions here in Japan, and the explicit awareness of the close affinity between these various pedagogical approaches to content-based learning in the form of liberal arts.

What is being proposed here explicitly has always been the implicit nature of university programs in which a majority or even a significant percentage of the students are not native speakers of the language of instruction. The good teachers in these programs instinctively adapt to the non-native language skills of the students they must teach, and are thereby engaging in second-language teaching, regardless of the content. This applies even to advanced students well beyond the academic level of average native-speaking students. And if the truth be said, it also applies to non-native faculty as well, who rarely write sophisticated prose in the target language without some need for native-speaker editing, no matter how brilliant or erudite the faculty member may be. It comes with the territory, so to speak, and the enormous difficulty involved in mastering a second language with high-level academic proficiency in adulthood.

The theoretical framework for CALLA has been presented as follows:

- Learning is an active and dynamic process.
- Three types of knowledge: declarative (knowledge of facts), procedural (knowledge of “how to” do things); metacognitive (relate current learning tasks to past knowledge and learning procedures).
- Declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge are learned in different ways and retrieved from memory in different ways.
- Teachers should learn to recognize declarative and procedural knowledge in content, materials, identify strategies used by students, and influence strategy use.
- Students can take control over their own learning and develop independent learning skills (*The CALLA Handbook*, Chamot, O’Malley, p.19)

None of the objectives of the Reading and Writing course and conversely, none of the framework principles for CALLA would be out of place within our entire Teachers License program.



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