A Content-based Language Teaching Approach to Academic Japanese

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Abstract: This paper describes the process and procedure of a project intended for the foreign students of an advanced Japanese language course at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Beppu, Japan. The program utilizes the content-based approach to help those foreign students to develop academic skills in Japanese and encourage collaborative study with Japanese students. This method also allows foreign students to gain more opportunities to receive feedback from Japanese speakers and to interact with them. Academic skill in foreign language cannot be gained discretely as in the cases of proficiency in its vocabulary, writing, listening and speaking. It is important that we should make each skill linked with each other to function synthetically so that the target language may be all the more comprehended. In addition, this paper provides strategy for the use of academic technology, beyond the classroom activities, to connect all study skills, contents and lecture topics in a comprehensive, organized way.

Introduction

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) is a universities with a bilingual campus founded in 2000 in Japan. The student population is 50% Japanese and 50% international. This is also true for the faculty but does not necessarily apply to the administration. The result is a Japanese university with a distinct international environment. Thus one of the unique and innovative ideas of *APU* is the core concept of a global setting. For some time now there have been calls for the internationalization or globalization of Japanese university campuses, but all to often this simply has meant to accept some more foreign students, to have Japanese language courses to support their leaning in Japanese, and to help them adjust to the Japanese language and system. On the other hand, the *APU* concept demands that all members, not only international students but also Japanese students expect to learn cross-cultural communication in a multicultural environment. The multicultural environment is expected to educate students with dual, interactive communicative competence. In short, the innovative point of the *APU* concept is that the environment is neither that of Japanese going to study abroad nor that of foreign students coming to study in Japan. Instead an attempt is made to develop a new concept of international multiculturalism in a dual-interactive way.

In order to understand the model above more fully, we now turn briefly to the anatomy of APU's aptly named bi-directional, interactive, dual learning environment: All students who wish to enter *APU* are asked to speak either English or Japanese at university level. The majority of Japanese students who enter this university based on their Japanese ability (Japanese basis) concentrates on learning English for the first 1～2 years while they are attending courses on introductory subjects in the departments of their chosen major. From then on they are required to attend both lectures provided in English and Japanese to earn credits to graduate. On the other hand, most international students who enter *APU* based on their English ability (English basis) concentrate on learning Japanese during their first 1～2 years while they are attending introductory subject courses offered by their chosen department. Again, for the last years of their study, they too are required to attend both lectures provided in English and Japanese to earn credits towards graduation. Hence all students are expected to attend both types of lectures provided in English and Japanese to fulfill university graduation requirements. We should note that both Japanese and English at *APU* are regarded as a second language rather than a foreign language for each learner.

Let us now examine the pedagogic approach and role

of the Japanese language courses and determine their place on this dual language campus. Overall, the language competence of international students is understandably much more diverse than that of the Japanese student population since each foreign country of origin has its own distinct language education system. Accordingly the English basis international students are placed into appropriate levels following placement tests and interviews. Then they are provided with a general Japanese language curriculum, which ranges from introductory to advanced courses. Although students who are placed into advanced courses may sometimes still have difficulties to follow regular subject courses in Japanese, they are nonetheless well motivated to tackle a variety of course tasks, which they must eventually pass to receive credits in Japanese. In order to better aid and assist these students, a course called "the adjunct model" is provided as a bridge course towards taking regular subject courses in Japanese without any language support. More importantly, the real purpose of this adjunct model course is to acquire Academic Japanese.

Background

In order to better understand the underpinnings of Academic Japanese we also need to look at recent developments in the profession. In 2002 the *Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students Program* started. This examination aims to evaluate whether international students who wish to study at the undergraduate level at universities or other higher educational institutions in Japan possess the Japanese language skills and the basic academic abilities actually needed to study at such institutions. Prior to this examination, many universities in Japan required international students to take the *Japanese Language Proficiency Test* for admission. Though the *Japanese Language Proficiency Test* aims to evaluate general Japanese proficiency, even the students who received the highest-level scores sometimes had difficulties to study at their new Japanese university. Hence the purpose of the revised examination was to evaluate the existing Japanese language proficiency and the basic academic abilities and potential of international students who strongly wish to study at the undergraduate level at a university in Japan. This came to be referred to as "Academic Japanese".

The term "Academic Japanese" first appeared in the process of devising the new examination (Kadokura, 2006). Since then, it is increasingly recognized as a goal for Japanese language educators who teach to students enrolled in Japanese universities. There are now several available Japanese textbooks, which enhance individual study skills in keeping with Academic Japanese. At *APU,* for example, faculty members began to develop a course to foster academic skills in a content-based course using technology as early as 2000. Although at the time Academic Japanese had not fully taken shape in the field, it is apparent in hindsight that this effort must be characterized as a substantial pioneering contribution to Academic Japanese. Initially, the need for an innovative coherent approach as later found in Academic Japanese became abundantly apparent as early as the late 1980's. The development towards this model is thus heavily influenced by the communicative approach to language teaching, which emerged as the most influential methodology in English language education and quickly gained currency in most other foreign language classrooms. Already at this stage several implications are apparent regarding Japanese language courses for advanced level students. In organizing courses for the beginning level, the course description for the upper level quickly became a way of developing guidelines. The necessity for a communicative approach to teaching the advanced level as well as the beginning level was stressed and developed as a way of teaching all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to advanced students (Kamada, 1990). Then in 1996, Douglas was one of the first to articulate the lack of perspective in teaching academic language ability. He pointed to the mistaken notion that oral skills merely satisfy mundane communicative needs in a newly acquired language. The conventional approach at the time focused on oral skills first and only shifted to reading in upper levels. Douglas went on to observe that a university setting also demands various oral activities such as discussions and presentations. These are no longer merely communicative strategies but part of academic language ability. Thus Douglas concludes, that the "curriculum in upper levels should aim to strengthen these types of oral skills as well as literacy skills" (Douglas, 1996). Today, we have a much better understanding of the discipline and

hence well defined aims and goals as recently set out by the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)*. The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* are an academic analog to the Japanese government language proficiency level descriptions, originally developed by the *Foreign Service Institute.* These guidelines essentially measure the performance of the listening, the speaking, and reading of a second language. Moreover the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* are influenced by ACTFL guidelines, especially in the field of communications. A prime feature of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* is to place communications in a wide-ranging context. There is no longer an emphasis on individual language skills like listening, speaking, reading, and listening. Instead, communication is understood as an (interpersonal) exchange with another party in order to interpret what one reads and hears and to present one's own opinions in return.

Throughout, the *ACTFL Guidelines* use the terms Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior to designate proficiency levels. In addition, the categories of Novice and Intermediate are further subdivided into three categories: Low, Mid, and High; the Advanced level is subdivided into Advanced and Advanced Plus. According to these guidelines, it seems that Academic Japanese must be placed within the range of the Advanced level and the Superior level. Still this is not always a clearly delineated measure. One of the four skills like reading, for example may fit the advanced-level description and thus suit academic skills. At the same time a learner's other skill, such as listening, may not always match the advanced-level description. S/he may thus not be able to follow sophisticated lectures in the target language. Still the guidelines, which describe each proficiency level, remain helpful. In keeping with the stated rubrics, Academic Japanese can be defined as follows:

Advanced-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:
- participate actively in conversations in most informal and some formal settings on topics of personal and public interest;
- narrate and describe in major time frames with good control of aspect;

- deal effectively with unanticipated complications through a variety of communicative devices;
- sustain communication by using, with suitable accuracy and confidence, connected discourse of paragraph length and substance;
- satisfy the demands of work and/or school situations.

Advanced-level listening is characterized by the ability to:
- be able to understand the main ideas of all speech in a standard dialect, including technical discussion in a field of specialization.
- follow the essentials of extended discourse which is propositionally and linguistically complex, as in academic/professional settings, in lectures, speeches, and reports.
- show some appreciation of aesthetic norms of target language, of idioms, colloquialisms, and register shifting.
- be able to make inferences within the cultural framework of the target language.
- have an understanding aided by an awareness of the underlying organizational structure of the oral text and include sensitivity for its social and cultural references and its effective overtones.
- rarely misunderstand but may not understand excessively rapid, highly colloquial speech or speech that has strong cultural references.

Advanced-level reading is characterized by the ability to:
- be able to understand the main ideas of all speech in a standard dialect, including technical discussion in a field of specialization.
- be able to read somewhat longer prose of several paragraphs in length, particularly if presented with a clear underlying structure.
- understand prose that is predominantly in familiar sentence patterns.
- get the main ideas and facts but miss some details.
- derive comprehension not only from situational and subject matter knowledge but also from increasing control of the language.
- negotiate texts at this level which include descriptions and narrations such as simple short stories, news items, bibliographical information, social notices, personal correspondence, routine business let-

ters and simple technical material written for the general reader.

Advanced-level writing is characterized by the ability to:
- be able to understand the main ideas of all speech in a standard dialect, including technical discussion in a field of specialization.
- be able to meet basic work and/or academic writing needs, produce routine social correspondence, write about familiar topics by means of narratives and descriptions of a factual nature, and write simple summaries.
- be able to narrate and describe in major time frames with some control of aspect.
- be able to combine and link sentences into texts of paragraph length and structure.
- be able to express structurally coherent concepts.
- demonstrate sustained control of simple target-language sentence structures.

In addition, all tasks take place in an authentic environment at a normal rate of speech or writing, using standard or near-standard norms. In short, students who are expected to acquire Academic Japanese need skills such as note taking, literature reviews, data collection, data analysis, and presentation skills in a real university setting. In addition, these communication skills can be characterized as synthetic, bidirectional and interactive performances that unfold within the authentic realm and help students acquire Academic Japanese. As mentioned earlier, the adjunct model provides the structural framework for this space.

Adjunct model classes at *APU* are essentially content-based. Simply put, the *APU* "Adjunct Model" is deeply rooted in *Content Based Instruction*, which combines lectures in the target language with language teaching to emulate an immersion environment for language learners. As described above, *APU* lectures are given in either English or Japanese. In his visionary work, Mohan already pointed out in 1986 that many students who enter postsecondary education "fail to reach their full potential in academic achievement because their language learning is poorly coordinated with their learning of content or subject matter" (Mohan, 1986). Mohan's findings were based on his observations at the *University of British Co-*

lumbia in Canada, which saw a dramatic increase in immigration at the time, prompting a significant demographic shift in the overall student population. Once a similar phenomenon became apparent at *APU,* its adjunct model integrated content and language in an approach that allowed native and non-native learners to share the same content lecture. As Snow indicates, "a key feature of the adjunct model is the coordination of objectives and assignments between language and content instructors" (Snow, 1991). The *APU* model initially followed this approach. However, adjustments were soon needed to become realigned with the original purpose of content-based instruction. After all, the primary goal of the adjunct model was not to relegate language faculty to a service component but to "promote the development of academic language skills necessary for success" since many first year university students are "inadequately prepared to deal with the demands of the university environment, particularly with respect to their reading, writing and study skills" (Brinton et al., 1989). Brinton, who in many ways defined content-based language instruction, earlier pointed out that the content-based instructional program meets linguistic and other academic needs of students by enrolling them concurrently in two linked courses that share the content base and thus complement each other in terms of mutually coordinated assignments. The key feature of this kind of adjunct model's academic component is the integration of native and nonnative speakers of the target language and the so-called sheltering of second language learners in a special course component. This ensures the authenticity of the academic demands placed on all students in the content course. Throughout, the focus is on modes of academic writing, reading, and study skills. Students think and learn in the target language by synthesizing information from the content area lectures and readings. At all times the four traditional language skills are integrated within the context of authentic content for discussions (Brinton & Snow, 1988). At *APU* this model was implemented by weekly content lectures coupled with adjunct Japanese classes that met three times per week. Together the four meetings became one unit. A vital additional role was played by the computer assisted instruction (CIA) facilities where students additionally met once a week. Here students could work with the lectures online form digital multimedia archives. We soon found that the

CIA component greatly improved learners' motivation. Key concepts from the content class could be revisited without the restrains of time and space and certain language skills could be activated through technology within an innovative effective environment. The online dynamics also fostered intercultural communication between Japanese and international students. Just because different cultures live in close physical proximity to each other this does not automatically ensure an intercultural exchange. Technology helped bridge the divide in many instances. Visitor sessions repeatedly promoted a language and cultural exchange in language learning classes. Each community of learners promoted a language and cultural in language learning classes. Amongst the inclusively accepting group it is obvious that visitors take the role of a learner. Within the difference in proficiency levels between native and non-native aptitude were translated into tutor roes. Thus diverse language levels and still ensured successful intercultural language learning within the content-based instructional adjunct model. More specifically, the syllabus for content-based academic Japanese language classes at *APU* set out the following learning goals and aims:

(1) Academic Competence in following a 95-minute lecture given in Japanese
(2) Research skills to complete an academic paper in Japanese in a given field based on original research with a clearly identified theme and topic.
(3) Competence in giving an oral presentation in the elected major field of studies and defend a thesis.

Throughout, course goals are aided by academic instructional technology such as secure e-mail, videoconferencing, and *WebCT* discussion boards. The role of these electronic course tools was specifically for the purpose of (1) better motivation (2) increased connection to authentic usages of the target language (3) increased practice (4) different assessment strategies. Overall, the collaboration within the course management system further adds a valuable synchronous class exchange component to the Japanese program.

Project description

The project here described started in 2003 as a pilot and continued in 2004 under the sponsorship of the *Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science* (JSPT). Its aim is a language and cross-cultural exchange between Japanese students who study English at *Ritsumeikan University* in Kyoto and international students who studies Japanese at *Ritsumeikan APU,* in Beppu. The exchange project can be characterized as Advanced-Japanese for Academic Purposes. In keeping with the findings discussed earlier, we mean academic communication skills as a whole such as interpersonal, interpretive and presentational skills in an authentic environment. This stands in contrast to the traditional separation of skills into speaking, reading, listening and writing.

The sample of student participants had the following distribution of place of origin: South Korea (10), Samoa (1), USA (1), Taiwan (1), Papua New Guinea (1), Vietnam (1), Malaysia (1). As mentioned before this group from *APU* was paired with Japanese learners from the *Ritsumeikan University'*s Kyoto campus. The project was conducted over 14 weeks, 95 minutes per class, 4 classes per week. In the course of the semester this exchange included asynchronous forum discussions, email exchanges, as well as one elaborate synchronous conference, and face to face exchanges. The central part of the project was synchronous conference. In order to assure successful collaboration the following preparatory steps where taken:

(1) Self-introductions to Kyoto students included a "personal history" or resume in Japanese.
(2) The theme for the conference evolved from a series of revised drafts.
(3) During the collaborative event short presentations where given in Japanese by *APU* international students, and in English by Rits Japanese students.
(4) Discussions followed in Japanese and then in English.
(5) The discussions were continued in the course management system where they also included related topics from the content-based lecture series such as "the changing middle-class consciousness in Japan", for example.

Discussion

Throughout, the faculty members involved were satisfied

that the exchange activities extended academic Japanese language competency as students completed tasks which increase their content-based Japanese skills through reading materials, writing an organized essay in Japanese, a presentation, and an oral defense of their thesis. The course management system had a successful role in broadening the discussions and deepening students' understanding. Each student selected specific themes for the synchronous conference. Students thus had an increased sense of involvement and ownership of their content topic, which motivated them further to express their ideas in the target language and to research lexical fields. The asynchronous forum discussion followed the synchronous conference. Each student raised a related topic in their target language and continued the discussion in that language. The asynchronous forum had two decided advantages. One advantage was the flexibility in terms of time. Another advantage was the increased use of the target language. In comparison, the synchronous discussion required the aid of a technician, the close coordination of teaching schedules on different campuses, and a determined focus on academic skills rather than technological distractions. Hence the synchronous discussions were limited to two occasions per semester. Throughout, the international students addressed their themes in Japanese while the Japanese students at the sister campus responded in Japanese as well. A sequence of written communication allowed *APU* students to practice the target language in use. They could easily visualize the most important key phrases, concepts, and themes. Identifying key words is a crucial ability for advanced students. Within this learning process the natural input given by the discussion partner is far more accurate than consulting a list of vocabulary or a dictionary. The guided exchange thus automatically increases the learner's native-like expressions. Examples from the selected themes for asynchronous electronic forum discussions included the following Japanese topics: *Hanryuu* (Korean trends and fads in Japan), commercialism in Japanese TV, the war in Iraq, juvenile delinquency, the changing middle-class consciousness in Japan, and non-smoking policies. Topics in English included aging industrial societies, dropping birth rates in Japan, English education in Japan, English education in the country of origin of the international student, and looming pension problems in Japan.

At times, some of the international students at *APU* suffer from culture shock and tend to withdraw to their original language group. They thus loose the motivation to learn Japanese while the bilingual environment of their own campus ironically does not impose the necessity for learning the target language. Thus they become cocooned in both their learning and living environment. Moreover, the sheltered environment prevents them to gain the confidence to use their target language since they do not have enough opportunities to actual experience any communication with Japanese students in Japanese. For such students, this practice, served as an incentive to realize what and why they learn. On the other hand, the role as supporter for learners using their more developed language, English, brought international students more self-esteem and confidence. As one student put it, "I learnt collaboration and partnership. And we were able to support one another while going over things like grammar and pronunciation." This shows that students started building a rapport with each other, and it also points to potential implications and the further possibility to expand this project to peer-learning. On the other hand, a few disadvantages also became apparent:

(1) There were difficulties in scheduling since each campus follows a different academic calendar.

(2) There were difficulties in encouraging all students to join this practice because of the expenses involved.

(3) The face-to-face practice is not incorporated into any part of the syllabus because of above obstacles.

In spite of these disadvantages, seen from the point of raising student's motivation and building rapport, the improvement and strengthen of this face-to-face practice in the bilingual international distance exchange program is obvious. Moreover, from the point of view of building rapport, the face-to-face practice is desirable at the beginning of each semester. Despite the video recorded file exchanges and synchronous conferences that preceded the asynchronous forum discussions, which activated communications and introduced discussion partners to each other, there is no real substitute for actual live face-to-face meetings to activate the exchange.

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Summary

The syllabus of the adjunct model Academic Japanese mentioned earlier also stipulates that students should learn the content of a lecture, entitled "Japanese society and culture". Importantly, no Japanese-speaking student is in the lecture although this is a lecture given in Japanese in a university in Japan. Hence this is a kind of sheltered class for international students. This group especially is in need of a resource partner to exchange views about the lecture material of the sheltered class. The proof of efficiency is summed up in the following comments made in one of the questionnaires: "I think that this was our chance to get another view and interesting comments from Japanese students. Since there are no Japanese students in our class." "I wanted to hear the opinions of Japanese students since all the content was about Japan." Additionally they could also get enhanced self-esteem and cross-cultural experience to giving Japanese students their opinion in English about the topic raised by students. We should note that Japanese students at *APU* don't represent typical Japanese peers for international students. When they chose *APU,* their attitudes towards international students changes from the general conception of other Japanese college students. The campus environment does not make them feel that they need to communicate in Japanese with a Japanese student. Therefore, we often find Japanese students who do not get used to speaking English. At the same time, many international students are interested in Japanese students at traditional Japanese universities. It becomes a good chance for them to experience the broader Japanese society within their generation and is a chance to make them realize the necessity of Japanese as a communication tool. Here they see the true necessity and usefulness of their Japanese studies. Another challenge was that the frequency of the exchange was too limited, though empathy and interest in the conversation partner are necessary to deepen one's understanding of a different culture. However, there was a student who made a comment suggesting exchanging a series of personal e-mails as a tool to deepen the personal aspect of the exchanges. The comment points to some hesitancy on the part of the students. This only highlights the instructor's role as a facilitator in distance exchange activities.

Based on my findings above I started to teach a course in Japanese communication skills in 2005, which aims to improve Japanese students' native language skills and expression. To my surprise, few participants in this course had been trained to write or express their own thoughts and opinions before entering university. Hence, the course set out to teach writing for the purpose of reporting and persuading readers. The need for novice writers to consider their readers and to develop an awareness of good organization and expressions for easy understanding became a central focal point. However, most of participants in the course initially did not give any consideration to the interaction between writer and reader. For that reason, most of them did not seem to care if their writing was easy or difficult to understand for their readers. Even basic structural organizational considerations such as grammatical sentence structures, coherence between sentences, and transitions between paragraphs were ignored in many instances. This lack of reader consideration turned out to be the root of flawed writing. Essentially this points to a lack of basic communication skills since any output such as speaking or writing is a means to communicate with others. Since the situation herein described is emblematic of a larger problem it will increasingly be necessary for native Japanese to be trained in communication skills in Japanese.

According to Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, "learning can be accomplished in a social process which is defined as communication rather than an individual, inner process "(Educational Technology Encyclopedia 2000). In light of this particular emphasis our next task is to change from the individual inner process learning style of a conventional university education to interactive communication learning processes. Revisiting our earlier project between international students from *APU* and Japanese students from *Rits* in 2004, we find that the international students' language competence did not help native Japanese student, but the formers' logical configuration skills did. The foreign students' competence in basic rhetoric, which was much better than that of Japanese students, was later echoed in the comments of the Japanese students.

Further research

As for the differences between international and Japanese students, there are significant differences of cultural and education backgrounds with regard to respective societies and schools from which they graduated. Another reason could be found in the project itself because it intentionally aimed to raise the aforementioned intercultural awareness among Japanese students. At the same time, we might take a closer look to see what constitutes "academic Japanese" as presented to international students who wish to study at university level institutions. Initially this is presented as "Japanese language skills and the basic academic abilities needed to study at Japanese institutions". Even before the formal *Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students Program* defined it, the *APU* Adjunct model methodology started to raise standards in the area of academic Japanese. The aims of APU's Adjunct Model were limited to the following:

(1) Academic Competence in following a 95-minute lecture given in Japanese

(2) Research skills to complete an academic paper in Japanese in a given field based on original research with a clearly identified theme and topic.

(3) Competence in giving an oral presentation in the elected major field of studies and ability to defend a thesis.

We should now build on the achievement of these goals and include more intercultural language learning objectives that prepare global citizens.

Conclusion

Perhaps the learning outcomes cited above can be regarded as relevant for all university students and may be the basis for future university education in general. Miyake (2005) points out that as the social circumstances which surround university education change, the purpose of higher education at the university level is not to make university students better adapt to academia but to raise them as autonomous citizens instead. The mission of most undergraduate level courses is no longer to impart high-level expert knowledge and to rear researchers with specialized research abilities. The aim now has shifted to raise citizens who are able to enter and advance an ever-changing society. Miyake considers "communication" in light of one's "role and place within a given community" (Miyake, 2005). Ultimately, the future certainly belongs to the further development and implementation of content-based curriculum designs, which include "face-to-face communication" with a focus on academic skills.

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