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On Topical English Courses and Materials for Less Advanced Students※

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要約：

トピック中心の英語学習は、仮の場面を想定してその結果ESLを抽象的な学習にしてしまうファンクション中心の英語学習の、すぐれた代案である。

概念的には内容中心の英語学習と似ているが、トピック中心の英語学習は、何か月かにわたって単一の課題を扱い、オーラルコミュニケーションの技術習得に焦点をあてることによって、学生の「有意義で役にたつ授業を」という要望にも対応している。英語のあまり得意ではない日本の大学生は、内容中心の英語学習の教材執筆者たちからはおおむね無視されてきたが、トピック中心の英語学習のなかでは、学生たちこそが、この学習法に最適の存在として意識されている。というのも、「時間をかけて努力もしているにも関わらず、自分が学習して得た知識のほんの一部分でも活用できるのは、英語でコミュニケーションをはかろうとするときだけなのだ」と彼らは気がついているからである。私が昨年担当して、環境問題を扱ったクラスは，私に「(環境問題のような) 実質的な内容をもつ教材を使った授業は、学生たちを［もっと勉強しよう、もっとしっかりした英語力を身につけよう］という気にさせる」と確信させてくれた。

I would like to add my voice to the growing field of content-based ESL education by proposing "topical" communication skills courses for lower intermediate and false beginners. As the generally accepted definition of content courses has drawn a number of curricular and methodological interpretations, I offer the notion of topical courses as distinct in two points. First, this type of course concentrates on a single (usually international) topic or issue for a minimum of several months. Second, it focuses predominantly on oral communication skills.

The advantages of such instruction have been convincingly shown elsewhere: it allows the natural use of English as a medium for learning; it is appropriate for teaching study skills like summarizing, note taking and outlining (Campbell, 1996); it has global significance, relevance and can utilize a large body of authentic materials (Peaty, 1995); it is based on the premise that "Good language learners worry more about getting things done with language than with the surface correctness of it" (Shuy quoted in Cantoni-Harvey, 1987, p. 24). Yet less advanced students have been largely ignored by content course materials writers, and suitable conversational activities are scarce.

Too often university English classes channel false beginners and low intermediate students into an ineffectual rut with continued training in passive English skills, making language study two-dimensional. More often than not, students are aware of this. They realize that despite so much time and effort, they can only access a fraction of their

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accumulated latent knowledge when trying to communicate. That this realization doesn't undermine students' confidence in actively pursuing better language skills in university is reason enough to experiment with different curricula. A class dedicated to, in my case, environmental issues and targeting listening and speaking skills can become an effective and completely new experience in English.

Why Topical Courses?

But there are more concrete advantages to topical courses. We teachers generally attempt to prepare our students with the skills to successfully navigate any basic English episodes they might encounter. Often we do this by focusing on all-purpose English communication skills and choosing a textbook with functional content, that is, one which gives students the opportunity to experiment with the language within a variety of slice-of-life topics and scenarios. This approach is suitable for some, but I have found that most students can not sustain an interest in "Money" or "American Food" as presented in a textbook for more than a single class period, if that long. If the instructor brings in props, visual aids and prepares games or exercises relevant to the text's lesson, the topic might be stretched to cover two or even three class periods. Then, rather than beating a dead horse, we move on to something else. Maintained throughout the year, this pattern can instill apathy and erode morale, as it leads to nowhere and lacks a clearly defined purpose.

Students do not want to train for that hypothetical, chance encounter. Clearly they wish their English classes to be applicable and relevant to *their* world, not hypothetical. In a poll administered last autumn by the Department of General Education at Nagano University, 46% of students studying in elective foreign language courses said that the school's mandatory freshman English class, structured to supplement skills learned in high school, was unnecessary—this response coming in spite of their limited ability to communicate after six years of pre-university study. More interestingly, most students who were dissatisfied with their language classes cited reasons such as: "it's boring," "not useful," "just like high school," "no reason to study this," "all the classes are the same." And it is understandable that they would want purpose and meaning in their language curriculum; for the majority who will rarely use English, training extensively for that chance English encounter can be mind-numbing.

Teaching a subject which is meaningful to students' lives is important for several reasons. Motivation is the most obvious. Offering a lesson objective which has relevance and applicability beyond language skills should be fundamental, especially for students at lower levels who can't as yet appreciate the rewards of foreign language competency and who every day have to find a reason to take interest. Essentially, listening, reading, writing and speaking skills, ragged though they be, should be the means to a more engaging end, not an end in themselves.

Topical courses also add an academic legitimacy and importance to the class that studying "Shopping" and "Sports" never could. As Philip Jay Lewitt (1995, p. 34) attests, they do not "talk down to students, or belittle their intelligence and curiosity and sense

of grown-upness." So often we ask students their opinion about something introduced only minutes earlier and are frustrated that they either don't have one or aren't confident enough to defend it when challenged. Concentrating on one topic for several months or longer gives the course structure and the students a focus. The time allows them to develop more complex opinions that they want to express and defend. All of this is instrumental in providing that meaningfulness without which ESL education is reduced to nothing more than an abstraction.

Of course, a lesson packed with daunting new terms can surely prove destructive to motivation and morale. It is for this reason that the teacher must emphasize that, once again, vocabulary is only a means to an end, the medium through which we study. Rote memorization should be kept to a minimum and replaced with more communicative activities which make contextual use of the vocabulary. Also, care must be taken that vocabulary not become cumbersome and a burden to the flow of the lesson. It should not be unnecessrily technical or specialized and definitions should accompany the text for easy reference. The only book on environmental issues (see Figure 1) I have found which does an excellent job at handling vocabulary is Shiokawa Haruhiko's *The Real World*, which is broken into three sections on the environment, global economy, and global society. The beginning of each unit begins with explanations of the various issues (global warming, ozone depletion, etc.) *in Japanese*, together with English equivalents of the difficult vocabulary. This is especially unique and useful as it provides students with the background information and confidence they need to begin the lesson. Reading passages are written in untechnical, clear and straight-forward prose with Japanese definitions supplied in the margins for immediate reference. Finally, there is an alphabetized index of words and phrases at the end of each section. This format leaves nothing hidden and emphasizes content rather than terminology, which is exactly how the problem of vocabulary should be treated.

For foreign teachers, topical courses also afford an excellent means of introducing cross-cultural studies or intercultural communication, as they draw out perceptions and understandings of issues as shaped by culture. You may find that your students' interpretations contrast your own in surprising ways, that "old men on bicycles" are an environmental problem, for instance.

The Materials

Actully, the most viable argument against topical university classes is the scarcity of suitable teaching materials. This isn't a problem if the teacher is both knowledgeable enough about the chosen topic and has the time to make original materials. Most of us, though, would benefit from the guidance of a text which is easy enough, communicative and sufficiently engaging to do the topic justice.

Stacks of topical ESL books are being written for Japanese students. Without too much digging I have found thirty on environmental issues alone! Figure 1 can serve as a reference list for these texts, but I also offer this list to show the kind of topical texts which are being published and to illustrate the dire need for materials for less advanced

students, materials which emphasize active rather than passive skills and which provide for more interactive study.

Unfortunately, almost all of these publications are intended for advanced students who have mastered the language enough to study these technically complex issues and their economic and political implications in undiluted, unannotated English. To their credit, most of these books are not merely tools for English study, they aspire to educate readers about domestic or global environmental problems and prompt them to take action, thereby doing what English language materials too often write off as beyond their students.

Figure 1 Reference List of ESL Materials for Teaching Environmental Issues

Classification	Texts
A, r	Carson, Rachel. 1993. *Silent Spring* (in 2 volumes). Eihosha Ltd.
I, ro	Cunningham, Paul & Yamamura Saburo. 1991. *Our Precious Earth*. Seibido Ltd.
A, r	Ehrlich, Paul et al. 1974. *This Uneasy Planet*. Nanundo.
A, r	Feininger, Andreas. 1992. *Trees*. Eihosha Ltd.
A, r	Fromm, Mallory. 1993. *The Cultural Network*. Seibido.
A, ro	Greenhalgh, Trisha. 1994. *Environment Today*. Longman Eichosha Books.
I, ro	Griesbach, Amanda & Kurogawa Yasuo. 1990. *Waribashi and Disappearing Rainforests*. Sanyusha
A, r	Hidaka, Toshitaka (ed.). 1974. *Man & Nature*. Kenkyusha Ltd.
A, ro	Hodgson, Peter. 1995. *Energy and Environment*. Kinseido Ltd.
I, ro	Knudsen, Jim et al. 1990. *Save our Planet*. Nanun-do.
I, ro	Knudesn, Jim & Maruyama Takao. 1993. *Saving our planet*. Nanun-do.
A, ro	Mack, Jane Barnes. 1994. *Fact* or *Fiction?: Environmental Issues and Japan*. Yumi Press.
A, r	McMillen, Wheeler. 1975. *The Green Frontier*. Eihosha Ltd.
I, r	Nicol, C. W. 1989. *The Japanese and Nature*. Asahi Press.
IU, r	Okajima, Shigeyuki & Stewart Hartley. 1991. *Only One Earth*. Kirihara Shoten.
A/I, i	Peaty, David. 1995. *Environmental Issues*. MacMillan Language House.
A, r	Porritt, Jonathon. 1990. *Where on Earth are We Going?* Asahi press.
IU, i	Rabley, Stephen. 1990. *The Green World*. MacMillan Ltd.
I, r	Sakakura, Takeshi et al. 1995. *Mankind and the Earth:VOA:Environment Report*. Asahi Press.
IU, ro	Shiokawa, Haruhiko. 1994. *The Real World:Problems and Prospects*. Kirihara Shoten.
A, r	Starke, Linda. 1995. *Ecology and Economy*. Sanshusha.
A, r	Takahashi, Norikane (ed.). 1970. *Emerson's Essays* on *Nature*. The Hokuseido Press.
I, r	Times, Early. 1992. *Environmentally Yours*. MacMillan Language House.
A, r	Urita, Sumio (ed.). 1993. *Our Planet Earth*. Kirihara Shoten.
A, r	Ward, Barbara & Rene Dubos. 1973. *Only One Earth*. Nanun-do.
A, r	Warner, Matt. 1970. *Living With Nature*. Gaku Shobo Press.
A, r	Whitehead, Alfred N. 1962. *Nature and Life*. Kaibunsha Publications.
A, r	Yamamoto, Masaaki & Nonaka Hiroo (eds.). 1991. *Crisis of Our Earth*. Kirihara Shoten.
I, ro	Yamamura, Saburo & Paul Allum. 1995. *Save our Planet*. Seibido Ltd.
I, r	Yamamura, Saburo et al. 1993. *Our Planet, Our Future*. Seibido Ltd.

Classification Key:

A-advanced	r-focus on reading skills only
I-intermediate	ro-focus on reading skills with some listening or other exercises
IU-intermediate and under	i-provides for interactive study

Sadly, many of the people authoring ESL texts on the environment seem to have little experience (or even interest) in ESL education. Rather, they tend to be environmental specialists. Often the English is complex and unnecessarily pedantic and the exercises which follow each chapter or reading passage are brief and superficial, typically testing vocabulary with T/F, matching, or fill in the blank exercises. They don't attempt to be interactive or to sharpen the oral skills of the students they are written for, which may be fine for individuals wanting to bone up on reading skills but is wholly unsuitable for false beginners.

Of the thirty, nineteen focus on reading skills only, while only two provide a framework for creating interactive study. Interaction is crucial for less advanced students who, unable to grasp the full meaning from the solitary task of reading, may most benefit from group study. Their ideal text, therefore, does not aim to compose the entire lesson; by introducing information and ideas it lays groundwork for learning which includes teacher and student input and initiative. Where and to what level the lesson ultimately goes depends on the particular class' needs and abilities.

Stephen Rabley's *The Green World* fulfills these requirements, as does David Peaty's *Environmental Issues*, though the former does not provide an index or any other help with vocabulary, and the latter assumes a rather high reading comprehension level.

Referring to the experience of co-authoring *Only One Earth*, Stewart Hartley recommends that "there should be no exercises in the book, since these would impose the writer's constraints on those who use it" (Peaty, 1995, p. 30). In this format, the book would require that the class take responsibility for developing supplementary study. If carefully implemented, this approach could be successful (and this text as well), though unless the students and teacher are particularly resourceful it flirts with the danger of reverting to a reading-based, passive form of study. Students have been trained to use their readers as the core of the lesson and may not be able to give supplementary activities the attention we would hope. Consequently, handing students such a book may diffuse our intention to generate a truly conversation-based class.

Application: A Class on Environmental Issues

The responsiveness and progress of university sophomores to whom I taught a course last year on environmental issues has convinced me that topical courses and materials should not be reserved for veterans. Below I offer some of my discoveries from this experience so that readers might benefit from my mistakes and successes.

Wanting to ensure that students were not immediately frustrated with formidable reading and vocabulary, I prepared my own materials for the first two months. This took the form of a sequence of Environmental Topics, delivered orally, on such issues as Japanese Culture and Nature, Religion and Natural History, Environmental NGOs in Japan, and Ecological Destruction and Japan. As these sessions were essentially oral, they were easily adaptable to students' linguistic level and knowledge of the material and were readily expandable into vocabulary and discussion-based activities.

Whenever possible I tried to present objective information, from a number of sour-

ces, representing different points of view. In the last of these Topics, titled "Is Environmentalism Really Necessary?, or, Is Environmentalism Real?" I presented evidence against the various global environmental crises currently being advanced by science. While this was one of the least successful classes in terms of constructive discussion (students seemed confused about my intentions and wanted to know "which information is right"), I can only hope they gained a bit of healthy skepticism.

In addition to the Topics, we administered a survey of 12 multiple choice questions concerning attitudes toward the environment to part of the university student body. The survey analysis was exciting, informative, and induced students to theorize—and verbalize—about the results. Another form of lesson was to give students a series of hypothetical problems to solve, ranging from local to global. In one case, for instance, they had to resolve a "garbage war" between town residents and the City Planning Office over the proposed construction of a new garbage treatment plant. This form of exercise is particularly constructive because it contains a defined goal, always necessary for a discussion to be successful (Helgesen, 1993). It also forced students to interact without the benefit of printed materials or vocabulary lists. Though initially resistant to my encouragement to "wing it," by the second or third scenario students had become less anxious and more responsive. I also liked this form of study because it forced consideration of issues from several standpoints.

Because I felt I owed students the chance to hear opinions other than my own (and because I was running out of things to say) I turned to a textbook. Though suspecting that the difficulty of reading passages might inhibit responsiveness, I chose to use selected material in Peaty's *Environmental Issues*, promising myself to proceed slowly and provide ample assistance with vocabulay. While each unit supplied sections on reading, listening and discussion, it was necessary to supplement the text's exercises with conversational activities in order to bring the level of material down to students' interactive abilities. I taught a unit of this text as follows.

1) I give an oral introduction to the issue. (Paraphrasing the main points of the reading passage made things easier later on.)

2) Distribute a blank vocabulary reference list, which the students have to fill in themselves (in English) from my oral explanations. As the text does not provide one, they were told to refer to this list when reading.

3) The actual reading is assigned as homework, with each student to prepare an oral summary of one appointed paragraph. (Lewitt's recommendation not to give homework and to have students do reading during already insufficient classtime undermines the whole purpose of having native speakers in the classroom.)

4) Students give their oral summaries and I test comprehension with questions. If comprehension is low, students listen as the passage is reread to them.

5) In pairs, students answer either the even or odd numbered reading questions. (Pairwork can break down or turn to Japanese if allowed to continue for more than 6-8 minutes.)

6) Wanting to personalize the material, I present opposing arguments orally, though if technical by way of a handout.

7) For homework students prepare an oral evaluation of the two arguments, telling what they believe and why.

8) Oral evaluation presented in groups of five or six.

9) I lead an interactive session using some of the discussion questions as well as related issues (usually relevant to Japan) drawn from the Environmental Topics lessons earlier in the year.

Throughout the lesson, I found it continually necessary to orally quiz vocabulary comprehension, which proved the single most important criterion of overall comprehension.

The most positive attribute of this particular course was the tendency for many (though not all) students to rise to the level of the material. To this extent, the maturity of the topical class became a self-fulfilling prophesy, evoking most of those characteristics exhibited by the "good" language learner, as described in David Nunan's *Language Teaching Methodology* (1991, p. 171): they find their own way; they are creative and experiment with language; they make errors work; they let the context help them in comprehension, and others too numerous to list here. While I cannot conclude that content-based courses mold "good" learners, for those able to adapt to the format, I feel the class to have been a successful journey in English learning and personal development.

The most worrisome point of this approach, in turn, was that those who could not—or would not—adapt (about 20%) became increasingly restless and alienated. These students represent one important qualification of content-based teaching, that it "must not lose [its] focus on the language skills being taught; [that] the content material must be utilized simply as a tool through which the target language is transferred" (Campbell, 1996, p. 26). For some of my students, therefore, a more traditional methodology may have been more effective. This balance is a tenuous one, and teachers considering topical courses will have the weigh this possibility for themselves.

Conclusion

Ironically, it is often the less advanced who most benefit from topical coursework. They have a thorough, though latent, knowledge of English and wanting, as we do, to convert this knowledge into communication will be most responsive when confronting new challenges. Topical or content-based courses can be an excellent way to offer these challenges, as they treat language as a concrete venue rather than an abstract concept. "Analysis of and focus on language form should take place, not for its own sake but as a supplementary activity to assist in the determination and transmission of meaning. In this way, attention to linguistic structure will contribute to the ultimate goal of actual communication" (McIntyre, 1996, p. 118). We as teachers should not confuse language skill with sophistication and deny our pupils broader linguistic experiences. We should educate with lessons of import and purpose which utilize English as a tool for understanding more than as a discipline to be mastered. It is in this capacity, after all, that the significance of language lies.

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