

Pacific Rim Economic Affairs:  
A Content-Based Language Learning Model

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**Introduction**

Japanese university students may seem to grasp English only at the level of elementary school students, but the reality is that most have the social and analytical skills, and intellect and curiosity about the world of twenty-year olds (Lewitt, 1995). To meet the student's intellectual needs while still providing the language learning component is a challenge, one that has been increasingly met by the development of content-based courses and curricula.

Interest in Asia and Asian affairs has grown amongst Japanese in recent years. This interest has grown as a result of several factors; including Japan's geographical proximity to, and increased trade with other Asian countries, the emergence of many Asian countries economically, and the fact that Japanese are traveling to Asian countries in increasing numbers. However, the growing interest and need for information about Asia has not been met adequately by curricula offerings in most Japanese universities. The change in global attitude to looking at East Asia from an economic perspective is a post-World War II phenomenon (Ikeo, 1997). With this shift, Asia has come to play an even more crucial role in world affairs. In spite of the onslaught of the Asian economic crisis in 1997, Japan relies much more heavily on trade with East Asian countries than previously. In 1992, Japan's trade with Asia was \$177 billion compared to \$152 billion with America, a significant increase from the 1992 two-way trade of \$77 billion and \$95 billion respectively (Rowler, 1995). This remarkable increase in trade and interdependence has also brought the need for a greater awareness of Asian economic affairs. In this light, a course in Pacific Rim Economic Affairs was designed for the Japanese University undergraduate level.

In this paper, content-based language education in the Japanese foreign language classroom will be examined along with an overview of the Pacific Rim Economic Affairs course taught at a university in Northern Japan. As Mohan (1986, p. 1) argues, "learners fail to reach their po-

tential in academic achievement because their language learning is poorly coordinated with their learning of content or subject matter.” In other words, language must also be used as a vehicle for learning subject matter, whereby language learning and content are not separated in the foreign language classroom.

## Literature Review

There has been a trend toward more content-based language teaching in Japan in recent years as evidenced by the variety of courses available at universities. In Sapporo-area universities alone, content-based language courses taught by native speaking instructors, cover fields as diverse as Sociology, British History, Geography, and Oceania. As opposed to more traditional language classes and communicative approaches to language education, content-based courses incorporate more authentic materials built around a specific topic or topics. In part, the move to increased content-based education has resulted in the creation of curricula and courses that can fulfill a real academic role coupled with providing a source of practical knowledge that students can draw upon in the future (Dobson, 1999). In foreign language acquisition, the gap between communicative competence and academic competence is often very wide, and conversational language is generally easier for the student to grasp (Arcaco, 1995). This stems from the fact that conversational language is context-embedded – that is to say that speakers or listeners can make use of many cues besides language in producing and interpreting messages (Kidd, 1994). In other words, the process of language learning and communication lends itself to ease in understanding communicative language.

However, content and language are related, and coupled together, may increase student motivation and critical thinking skills (Brinton, Snow and Wesch, 1989). Academic language, unlike communicative language, contains numerous words unfamiliar to students whose competence is limited to communicative language and rudimentary reading and writing skills.

Students enrolled in content-based language courses benefit by learning more specialized vocabulary in context, and studying a specific field, thus motivating the student to think about and understand the topic through the target language to a certain extent. Brinton, Snow and Wesch (1989, p. vii) express this as, “the concurrent study of language and subject matter: with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material.”

There are three broad categories of content-based foreign language instruction: theme-based instruction, sheltered content instruction and adjunct language instruction (Brinton, Snow and Wesch, 1989). There are also other approaches such as the Foresee approach, but they are focused more towards school age students immersed in the second language environment (Kidd,

1994). The appropriate approach depends on the specific program needs, environment, and institution. Theme-based language instruction is often used to boost the use of concrete subject matter in the language classroom, which is presented and used by the language teacher as the basis for language analysis and practice. Course curricula may be designed around a number of unrelated topics, such as computer technology, health and fitness, media, and the internet, or around one main theme or topic such as economics. Of the three models, theme-based language instruction is the easiest to administer, requiring the least in terms of support systems (Brinton, Snow, and Wesch, 1989). Theme-based content-based instruction is also the most common approach used in non-target language environments.

Sheltered content instruction consists of content courses taught in the second language by a speaker of the target language. The students in the sheltered content class take the class separately from students who are native speakers, and the class acts as a bridge-type course. The sheltered language course is built around an existing course which can attract large enough numbers of second language speakers to justify creating a special lecture or discussion section for non-native speaking students. The sheltered language course covers the same material as the regular class, but the instructor must bear in mind the potential language difficulties of the students in the presentation of the lectures and material. Seen as an alternative to advanced language classes, sheltered language courses give students the chance to immerse themselves in a subject with material that is not watered down in terms of content. Additionally, the course requirements may be changed depending on program needs and goals. For example, a course may focus on developing listening skills as opposed to speaking or writing.

Adjunct language instruction differs from the first two models described in that students are enrolled concurrently in two linked courses – a language course and a content course. The two courses complement each other in terms of assignments and share the same content base. In this model, the second language learner might be sheltered in the language course with other non-native learners, and integrated in the content course with native speakers. Unlike theme-based instruction and sheltered instruction, adjunct language instruction requires a great deal of coordination between the interlocking courses.

All three approaches to content-based language acquisition share some common principles, most importantly, that successful language learning occurs when “students are presented with target language materials in a meaningful, contextualized form, with the primary focus on acquiring information. A second shared feature concerns the twofold aim of the models use of authentic tasks and materials as opposed to watered-down versions. The materials used (sic) in the sense that they were not originally produced for language-teaching purposes.” (Brinton, Snow, and

Wesch, 1989, p. 17). Moreover, content-based language learning addresses one major criticism of English language teaching. That is that there is a large gulf between classroom activities and real life, the separation of ELT from the mainstream of educational ideas, and the lack of content in its subject matter (Kidd, 1994).

## Materials and Challenges

Creating content-based curricula for use in the university foreign language classroom presents several challenges. First, finding appropriate material for content-based courses can be challenging. In the case of Asian Economics, there are not any commercially available texts that are specifically written for non-Japanese instructors that are not overly broad, or too superficial in the treatment of the subject matter. There are a number of English readers available such as John Drucker's (1996), *Understanding the World Economy*, and Hayano and Nakayama's (1997), *Current Business Trends in Japan: Reading The Economist*. However, they do not specifically address recent economic issues in East Asia, nor provide background introductory-level economic information at the same time. To compensate for the lack of appropriate material for lectures and as supplementary reading and information, it was necessary to create course lecture notes and compile statistics, charts, and information from scratch, and then amend and update materials on an ongoing basis.

Other classroom problems include issues such as class size, the alignment of teaching strategy, the presentation of material, and goals of the course with the stated purpose of the course. The course, Pacific Rim Economic Affairs was designed as a large lecture-style course for primarily English majors. The course is open to first through fourth year students, and designed to increase listening skills, build specific vocabulary, and provide an introduction to the field of economics in the Pacific Rim context. As such, there is a challenge of selecting relevant themes, finding appropriate resources, and presenting it at a level appropriate to the student's ability.

## Current Pacific Rim Economic Issues: Course outline

The course is designed around a 26-week schedule where the class meets once weekly for a one and a half-hour lecture. Topics and sub-topics in the course are broadly linked together by theme, and geography. While many of the topics overlap and are recycled throughout the year, they also work as "stand-alone" capsules.

### First Semester

Week 1–4 Introduction to Asia and Economics  
Week 5–6 South Korea and Taiwan  
Week 7–9 Hong Kong and Singapore  
Week 10–12 Overseas Chinese and Inter-Asian Trade  
Week 13 Semester Final

### Second Semester

Week 14–16 China  
Week 17–19 Southeast Asia and ASEAN  
Week 20–22 Contemporary Challenges and Problems  
Week 23 Economic Prospects for Asia  
Week 24–25 Asia and Africa  
Comparison and Review  
Week 26 Final Exam

**Week 1–4: Introduction:** The students who have entered the course generally have limited knowledge of economic principles and of Asia. An overview of basic facts, geography, and an introduction to basic economic principles is necessary. The course itself focuses on macro-economic topics. This introduction is followed by an explanation of economic principles around which the course has been designed: the quantity of labor, the quantity of physical capital, the quality of labor, and the efficiency in which the inputs of capital and labor are combined (Rowler, 1995). These four elements have many recurring themes and provide a practical and accessible analytical framework around which to structure the course. Economics without context is far too theoretical, and as such the introductory lessons, like all lessons, are best taught by using many examples.

**Week 5–6: South Korea and Taiwan:** Due to similar levels of economic development, both South Korea and Taiwan are readily comparable. Both countries have achieved economic growth through the implementation of different policies. In comparison, the contrasting policies of government-led economy and market-led economy as well as export-led growth are explored. Both South Korea and Taiwan, like Japan, are resource poor, so comparison and Japan-related examples are plentiful and illustrative.

**Week 7–9: Hong Kong and Singapore:** Like South Korea and Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are readily comparable, and have both achieved their economic prosperity in a relatively short time and in very different ways. Hong Kong returned to China on July 1, 1998 under the “one country – two systems” policy, and its economic characteristics and policies remain largely unchanged. Hong Kong has had a very laissez-faire economic system with little government interference in terms of business regulations and taxes, and serves as a gateway to China and as a major Asian business hub. Conversely, Singapore is a much more controlled economy and society, and while its economy, like that of Hong Kong relies highly on a modern service sector, there are many differences. These include factors such as the relative high pay of civil

servants, the government's focus on clean administration, and strong leadership (Naisbitt, 1997).

**Week 10–12: Overseas Chinese and inter-Asian trade:** The role of the overseas Chinese in the economies of Southeast Asian countries cannot be ignored. Many estimates of the combined economic power of the overseas Chinese measured as a whole put them in third place in the world, only behind the United States and Japan (Rohler, 1997). In Southeast Asia in particular, the overseas Chinese dominate many industries and control a large part of the economies of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Suryadinata, 1985; Anwar, 1996). The role of the overseas Chinese in Asian economics, along with topics such as their role in foreign investment in China is explored. Similar in theme, but not the same, is the increased inter-Asian trade and investment between East Asian countries. Many Asian countries are natural trading partners due to their geographic proximity, and the increasing trade between Pacific Rim nations is explored.

## Semester 2

**Week 14–16: China:** Under Deng Xiao Ping, China began to open its doors to trade slowly in the early 1980s. Since that time, China has undergone a tremendous transformation economically, and over the past ten years has had annual growth rates of around 10% (Clark and Roy, 1997). Although China remains a largely undeveloped country, its potential is huge, and it continues to grow quickly. The Chinese so-called socialist market system, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, technology transfer, and the urban shift in China are among the themes explored. One video documentary, *China Boom: Nurturing the Socialist Market Place*, provides an interesting and insightful look into the introduction of consumer goods to the Chinese market, and the restructuring of the Chinese “iron rice-bowl” industries.

**Week 17–19: Southeast Asia and ASEAN:** The tiger economies of Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia, along with Vietnam are currently in the midst of an economic crisis. Nevertheless, these countries while all growing at different paces have made huge economic strides over the last couple of decades. Economic and social policies/events such as Doimoi in Vietnam, political unrest Malaysia, “people power” in the Philippines, and the demise of Suharto in Indonesia are explored, along with the gradual emergence and role of ASEAN. The role of human capital increasing successes in areas such as education and the impact of events such as the Vietnam War are also discussed. And the documentary, *Indonesia: Urban Development in Jakarta*, is used to look at the role of ever-increasing urban pressures on mega-cities such as Jakarta, and the role of the informal economy.

**Week 20–22: Contemporary problems and challenges:** This is a broad topic which examines

current economic events and problems. Topics such as the role of the International Monetary Fund and its "recipe" and demands for economic reform are discussed. Also explored are some of the dark sides of rapid economic development such as labor problems and the environment. To supplement this, the video documentary, *South Korea: Inside the Miracle* has been used to see a different side of economic development.

**Week 23: Economic prospects:** This topic examines the current economic climate, and looks at possible future direction of economic development in Asia.

**Week 24–25: Comparison and review:** Asian and African development provide useful and insightful ideas into why many East Asian countries have had such successful and prolonged growth rates. While not all Asian countries have had the success of nations like Malaysia and Taiwan, and not all African countries suffered the failures and horrors of Rwanda and Nigeria, as broad geographic regions there are many areas of comparison between Africa and Asia. These include economic policy, stability, politics, health, colonial history, foreign investment, and real interest rates, to name a few. Some of the roots of East Asian economic growth and development can be seen in the comparison, and this is useful for both review and comparison.

## Conclusion

Asian economics is a challenging and rewarding subject area for students. In the language classroom, there are numerous challenges in raising student interest and developing higher academic analytical and comprehension skills in any course. Content-based language courses are no different. Teaching language through content can serve to increase student motivation and ability in a number of ways that the traditional and communicative language teaching approaches cannot. In theory, students must digest and understand target language material that is not watered down, and has specific content goals, coupled with vocabulary and language learning goals. Through content-based language courses such as the one described in this paper, student's language and academic ability in the target-language may improve, but more research needs to be done.

Pacific Rim Economics covers a broad range of countries, events, history and cultures. As such, the course described in this paper only scratches the surface in contemporary Asian economic affairs, and economics of developing countries. It is intended to provide an introduction to general economic thought and affairs in contemporary Asia, and to provide a spark for students to further explore the field. East Asia is home to around a third of the world's population, and in the future will undoubtedly continue to grow in importance for Japanese trade. Through the globalization of economic trade and the shrinking of the world, the need for Japan

to understand its closest neighbors more will only grow. Teaching foreign language learners the provision of relevant, up to date, and useful information is critical. Courses in fields such as economics serve to fill this gap.

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