

# CBLT: Is It a Better Choice for Implementing Japan's Educational Reforms?

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## ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revised curriculum guidelines in 2017, and in it, the MEXT defined three primary goals across all the subjects, which include: 1) developing oneself, envisioning lifelong learning; 2) increasing solid subject knowledge; and 3) acquiring cognitive, evaluative, and expressive skills. In terms of foreign language education, communicative abilities in five areas were strongly addressed, which included: listening, speaking, negotiation and presentation, reading, and writing. Furthermore, developing English productive skills was identified as an acute problem (MEXT, 2017). In response to the revision, the author suggests adopting *Content-Based Language Teaching* (CBLT) for implementing English education reforms. Although, in many Japanese high schools, the grammar-translation method appears to be central teaching practice, the author states empirical research findings do not support effectiveness of the method for developing communicative abilities. Research on memory indicates episodically oriented semantic information can be held longer and retrieved easier (Baddeley, 1986). Research also suggests practice be important to be able to communicate fluently and communicatively; however, acquired skills through practice done in a rule-based instructional context is unlikely to be transferred to a context, in which L2 learners use the skills for communicating with a person (DeKeyser, 2007). Researchers argue that L2 learners should practice particular skills exactly in the same context where they use them. Drawing on these supports from SLA, the author examines two major CBLT programs, namely immersion programs and *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL). The author suggests theme-based English curricular be a viable option for Japan's English curriculum reforms.

claiming that they provide L2 learners with ample opportunities to recycle the language, gain relevant content knowledge, as well as promote their cognitive capabilities. The author also describes pedagogical approaches to CBLT.

**Key words:** curriculum reforms, MEXT, L2 learning, cognitive learning, skill acquisition, Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

This article examines the features and pedagogy of *Content-Based Language Teaching* (CBLT) and explains why it could be a better pedagogy for implementing Japan's latest proposed educational reforms. In this article, CBLT is used as a general umbrella term referring to bilingual and foreign language education that gives simultaneous attention to academic content and the language the learners are trying to acquire (Lyster, 2017). The article looks at the features of immersion programs and *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL) currently being used in European countries to determine their potential applicability to secondary and tertiary English education in Japan.

In 2014, experts in the field of English education gathered and held a series of ambitious meetings at the headquarters of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The participants discussed current problems and future outlooks for English curriculum reforms. The purpose of this initiative was to make it possible for Japanese students to achieve top-level English skills in Asia, particularly necessary in the increasingly globalized world. At the first experts' meeting, which was held in Feb., 2014, the Vice Minister of the MEXT, Mr. Nishikawa addressed a serious issue, the low level of Japanese students' English speaking abilities in spite of receiving six years of systematic English instruction (MEXT, 2014). Concerns and possible solutions were discussed, and at the end of a series of meetings, the committee published *the Five Proposals* for improving current instructional practice, a summary of which will be presented in the next section.

In Japan, English subjects have long been taught through the language-focused approach. This traditional language teaching approach focused on the rule-based mechanics of the language system, so it is often pointed out that it inhibits L2 learners' cognitive development in educational settings. (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). What is problematic about this method is that it only allows students to formulate short phrases for conversations, so the majority of students fail to use the language for intellectual exploration to

build knowledge. As Cammarata, Tedick, & Osborn (2016) succinctly state:

By and large, their curricular structures are grammar driven and skills based, and fail to connect with learners' lived experiences. Such structures fail to entice students to learn languages or use them beyond the classroom walls, and prevent the development of advanced literacy skills that foster *higher levels of thinking* (p. 30, italics added).

To remedy this situation, I suggest that the English public education system adopt CBLT programs, which essentially have equivalent educational goals to those defined in the guidelines. In the sections which follow, I will try to map out the theoretical as well as practical aspects of CBLT and possible ways it can feasibly be incorporated into Japan's English education system. I will first review the goals and instructional approaches proposed by the MEXT and the revision of the 2017 Curriculum Guidelines, and then examine how CBLT programs could be implemented in light of theories on second language acquisition (SLA).

### 1. *The Five Proposals for English curricular reforms*

The need to reform English education in Japan is critical and urgent. *The Five Proposals* proclaimed at the end of a series of the experts' meetings for English education presumably provided a blueprint for the 2017's revision of curriculum guidelines, points of which are summarized below:

*Proposal 1. English programs must set observable curricular performance goals, i.e., what students will be able to do using English.*

Schools ought to formulate CAN-DO lists of their goals, and they should assess students' performances based on the lists. This proposal underscored the importance of coordinated reform of the entire educational system from primary through tertiary levels.

*Proposal 2. Students must cultivate positive attitudes towards communicating with others in English.*

From junior high school onward, teachers ought to use English as the medium of instruction, modifying the language according to the levels of the students.

*Proposal 3. University entrance exams ought to assess all four communicative skills.* Universities ought to consider adopting assessment tests offered by private testing services for evaluating applicants' communicative skills.

*Proposal 4. Teaching materials must be enriched across all ages to integrate productive linguistic activities.*

It is pedagogically imperative that the main textbook includes tasks through which students can engage in meaningful linguistic activities, for example, discussing topics or giving presentations. Effective materials and the tools, such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT), should be used in conjunction with the textbook to support these pedagogical tasks.

*Proposal 5. Schools must cooperate with local institutions and experts to enhance pedagogical techniques to teach communicative skills.*

Universities must enrich English teacher training courses for future educators so that they can learn practical instructional frameworks for *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT).

Subsequently, in 2017, the MEXT revised the Curriculum Guidelines, in which the general provision states that, across all the subjects, the curriculum must be well organized and managed to ensure that students: a) develop themselves and engage in their lifelong learning; b) attain deep subject knowledge; and c) acquire cognitive and critical thinking skills. As for English subject, primary goals are for students to nurture productive skills. These skills include the ability to participate in discussions and give speeches in English. Moreover, it is stated that the English curriculum should also cultivate critical logical thinking and problem solving skills (MEXT, 2017).

Furthermore, the MEXT articulates new goals for education across all the subjects. The three types of learning skills and learning behaviors required of the students are summarized as follows:

- 1) Students must play a proactive role in their own learning, e.g., setting goals and taking the lead on their own.
- 2) Students should learn through interactively negotiating meaning, e.g., discussing topics with others in search of solutions.

- 3) Students must realize inquiry-based deeper learning, e.g., synthesizing information from multiple sources to arrive at possible solutions.

The MEXT identified these three learning skills as essential in all subjects for students to succeed in an increasingly globalized and technologically developed world in the 21st century. The MEXT also states that these educational reforms ought to be implemented as coordinated reforms from primary school and junior and senior high, through to tertiary education to be fully realized in the overall educational system (ibid). These aforementioned directions may greatly change current high school teaching practices, which I will review next from the literature.

## 2. Traditional language teaching instruction

In Japan, *the grammar-translation method* has been long employed in language teaching since the beginning of English education. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), the primary goal of the grammar-translation method is for students to be able to accurately translate English reading passages into their L1. Generally, learning how to read and write is the primary goal of such instruction and being able to speak and listen is secondary. The classroom strategy for achieving that goal is to have students understand a set of vocabulary and grammar forms appearing in readings. Typically, classes start by reading a passage out loud, and then students are asked to read a few lines and to translate them into their L1. If they hesitate in translating, teachers give short definitions of any unknown words in their L1. After reading the passages, students are asked to answer comprehension questions on the passages, and then the teachers explain the use of important grammar. Students complete additional exercises related to grammar usage. At home students are required to memorize given sets of vocabulary with their L1 meanings and complete some writing tasks, usually sentence-based. These teaching methods are designed to help students correctly understand the passages. Basically, learning the culture of the language is confined to the content of the passages. The role of the teacher is to teach students the formal system about the target grammar and the L1 meaning of the target vocabulary. Students are *not* expected to speak, listen, or even pronounce the language appropriately or communicatively because spoken English is of secondary importance (ibid).

High schools in Japan have used the *yakudoku* method, which is mostly equivalent to

the grammar-translation method. In 1989, the MEXT, however, for the first time, proclaimed that the goal of instruction was to nurture positive attitudes towards communicating in English. Subsequently in 1999, *nurturing practical communication skills* was defined as the primary purpose of teaching English (as cited in Nishino, 2011).

With regard to the current use of CLT, Nishino (2011) researched high school teachers' perceptions of CLT and their teaching practices, which revealed that there was a significant gap between high school teachers' perceptions and their actual practices. The study reported that the majority of teachers (n=137) thought that students could learn communicative skills by actually trying to speak English communicatively by trial and error in that they acknowledged the importance of CLT. However, there appeared to be certain factors that restricted implementing CLT. First, the teachers did not think that they had sufficient skills for implementing CLT because they had not received effective teacher training for CLT through their courses in university, nor had they themselves received CLT instruction from their teachers during high school. Second, they frequently stated that large class size prevented them from implementing communicative activities (79% of the responses). It seems likely that, for many teachers, the *yakudoku* method still has a central place in their teaching practice. The results of this survey on teaching practices raise serious concerns. Over half of the teachers did *not adopt* or *rarely adopted* activities relevant to CLT. The proportion of the teachers that conducted the following activities associated with CLT was reported: having students write essays and stories (12%); having students give speeches and presentations (24%); orally introducing topics in English (37%); giving task-oriented activities, e.g., information-gap (46%); games and songs (52%); and group- or pair-work (52%). This indicates that meaning-based productive activities, such as writing stories or giving speeches, were greatly neglected in teaching practice, which arguably implies that teaching the formal systems about language still seemed to be a common practice in high schools.

### 3. Supports for CBLT from SLA research

Using linguistic, knowledge-oriented (the systems of the language) teaching methods do not seem very effective in promoting language learning according to research on memory. Psychologists distinguish two types of memory capacity: *short-term/working memory* (STM) and *long-term memory* (LTM) (Baddeley, 1986, 2000). STM is a temporary, heightened state of activation that is maintained for a short period of time. Normally, in-

coming information is recognized through the phonological loop (sound) and the visuospatial sketchpad (images), and through a *central executive*, the information is processed, integrated, and coordinated. The information in STM does not last long and decays rapidly. STM is limited in capacity as well. We cannot pay close, conscious attention to the information conveyed through different components (sounds or images) simultaneously; some information may be processed inattentively; thus, left unnoticed. Articulatory acts, such as repeating words, are assumed to prevent memory from decaying (ibid). Baddeley claims there is a third system, *episodic buffer*, a component of which is dedicated to linking information across the visual, verbal and spatial domains and integrates it into a whole unit in chronological order, such as in a story or a series of scenes. This component is also assumed to have links that transform STM to LTM.

LTM, on the other hand, holds information almost permanently, and the capacity is very large, albeit not infinite. The distinction between STM and LTM is that LTM is episodic and semantically oriented, and it is durable and superior to STM. An interesting fact is that memory tasks that require elaborate semantic activation are retained far better and longer compared to the memory of surface level tasks.

Craik and Tulving (1975) found evidence that semantically-oriented memory tasks resulted in superior memory retention. For example, the answer to a semantic question asking a word's meaning (e.g., He met a \_\_\_\_\_ on the street.—friend? cloud?: answer—friend) is remembered much longer than the answer to a shallow level analysis question, for example, identifying the category or the appearance of a word, (Is the word a type of fish?—shark?/heaven?;, answer—shark). They concluded that deeper processing of the meaning yielded superior memory. Craik (2002) states that “‘deeper’ refers to the analysis of meaning, inference, and implication, in contrast to ‘shallow’ analyses such as surface form, color, loudness, and brightness” (p. 308, quotation marks in original). The information provided episodically and semantically can be remembered in depth, for example, children can completely remember a *story* told to them only one time. It can be retrieved easier and can act as a catalyst for transforming the information to long-term memory. This suggests that structurally oriented rule-based learning is not superior to CBLT which requires semantic orientation.

Another important question is whether L2 learners are able to *transfer* learned knowledge from one context to another. For example, is it possible for L2 learners to use the language learned through rule-based exercises, e.g., filling in a worksheet or reading aloud repeatedly, in other contexts such as meaning-oriented speaking or writing? Re-

search findings suggest this kind of transfer of knowledge seems unlikely. Anderson (1985) explains two kinds of knowledge involved in skill acquisition: *declarative knowledge* and *procedural knowledge* (as cited in Lyster, 2007). The first stage is to build declarative knowledge, i.e., to understand concepts, construct schemata or information, e.g., historical or scientific facts. The second stage is a practice phase, in which learners apply the learned declarative knowledge and skills to *cognitive operations* (e.g., problem solving) or *motor operations* (e.g., driving a car) in order to perform the skill easily and automatically. This is a transformative stage, during which learners concentrate and engage in repetitive practice with a lot of attention (DeKeyser, 1998). DeKeyser is among the linguists who have emphasized the importance of practice in L2 learning and have developed *Focus on Form approach*, i.e., practicing grammatical knowledge within meaning-based teaching context.

DeKeyser (2007), however, argues that practice in a particular skill is *context specific*. For example, when L2 learners practice rules governing the language in a fill-in-the-blank worksheet or shadowing the sentences, it might not prepare them to do better in another context, for example a context, in which learners talk about personal ideas. In the same vein, practice in listening to language helps learners better understand incoming linguistic information but does not help them to write better. DeKeyser states L2 learners should practice the skill exactly in the context they want to use it. Vygotsky (1978) states as well, citing Thorndike's past research, that particular aspects of skills such as observation, attention, memory, judgment, and so forth are, to some extent, independent of the others, as shown below:

special training affects overall development only when its elements, material, and processes are similar across specific domains; habit governs us. ... improvement of one function of consciousness or one aspect of its activity can affect the development of another only to the extent that there are elements common to both functions or activities (p. 83).

These lead to us to justify the notion that if we want L2 learners to develop communicative speaking capability, they must practice actually speaking to a person face to face for communication.

The limitations of teaching language as an *object*, focused on rules and structures, have been discussed extensively (Vygotsky, 1978; Martin & Rose, 2008). Traditionally,



foreign language teaching referred to acquiring the systems of language—phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, and so forth. However, language cannot be separated from the development of the L2 learner's mind and cognition, and learning the components of the language for their own sake will not realize the significant functions that language serves for human cognition. We should consider the fact that the use of language is intrinsically related to human cognition, culture, and the society in which it is used. Whether speaking or writing, language fundamentally functions as a social process for *meaning making* and *constructing knowledge* within a larger social community. Cammarata et al. (2016) state that the potential benefits of foreign language learning are threefold:

- 1) To promote cognitive learning in that it enables L2 learners to enhance advanced intellectual cognitive development;
- 2) To contribute to shaping self-identity. That is, L2 learners can posit themselves in other cultural communities, being aware of the self and others in the communities;
- 3) To nurture a sense of membership so as to serve as a member of multi-lingual and multi-cultural societies. In other words, learning a foreign language develops in these learners additional personal traits.

All in all, a curriculum based on grammar-oriented pedagogy alone is not effective in developing the communicative capabilities of L2 learners. Current memory research suggests that L2 learners likely retain linguistic information longer and easier when it is processed episodically and semantically as opposed to when it is processed structurally and shallowly. Deeply processed language, for example involving making inference or prediction, can be retained longer than shallowly processed one with recognition of sound or appearance. Qualitatively superior memory storage, or LTM, holds episodically and semantically oriented memory. Learning a foreign language affords L2 learners a window to view the self and phenomena reflectively and critically. All this suggests that integrated learning in tandem with content learning may be a feasible solution to the problem of poor English language learning outcomes in Japan. Next, I will describe the core features of CBLT and its pedagogy.

#### 4. What is CBLT?

CBLT can vary across the different educational settings, in which it is implemented.

There are two types of CBLT depending on the kind of learners. One is CBLT for *majority language students* and the other is for *minority language students*. The former refers to the programs, in which students learn L2, but whose L1 is spoken widely in their communities (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). For example, students learn academic content in L2 while they maintain a strong L1 through exposure to their local community. This type of program is termed as *additive bilingualism* because it nurtures L2 while supporting the strong L1. CLIL falls into this group as well. (Lyster, 2007).

Another group of CBLT programs are for minority language students. An example is mainstream education in which immigrant students study exclusively in L2 without receiving sufficient support from their L1. This is defined as *subtractive bilingualism* because students develop their L2 at the expense of their L1.

Examining the effects of CBLT for minority language students is beyond the scope of this paper, so instead, the next section focuses on two major CBLT programs for majority language students, namely immersion programs and CLIL.

#### 4.1. Core features

In applied linguistics, CBLT gained a good reputation after its remarkable success in Canadian immersion programs was reported. It was in the 1960s that an ambitious French immersion program began in Montreal, Canada. Forward thinking parents took the initiative to try a radical approach, in which the school language was switched to

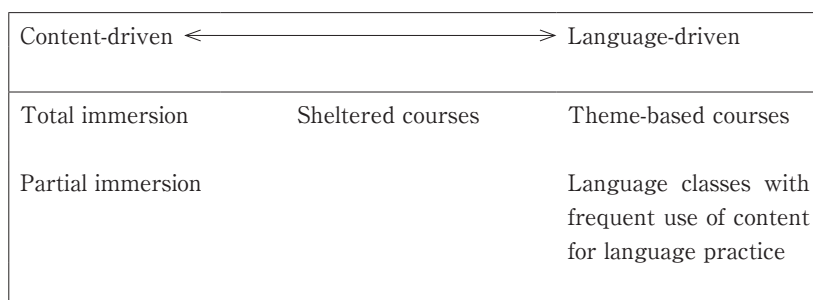
**Table 1.**  
*Core Features of Canadian Immersion Programs*

Category	Features
1. Language of instruction	Subject matter is taught in the target language.
2. Curriculum	The immersion curriculum parallels with that of the local curriculum.
3. Educational philosophy	The programs' aim is additive bilingualism. The students' L1 is taught as a subject in the curriculum.
4. Teacher characteristics	Subjects are taught by bilingual subject teachers.
5. L2 exposure	Exposure to L2 is confined to the classroom.
6. Language level	The students' language level at initial point is similar when they enter the programs.
7. Culture	The classroom culture is that of the local L1 community.

French for majority English speaking students (Lyster, 2007). Swain and Lapkin (2005) describe core features of immersion programs as shown in Table 1.

There are two types of programs: *total immersion* and *partial immersion*. The former generally refers to a program that often begins from kindergarten, where almost 90% of the instruction is provided through the medium of the L2. Instruction in L1 is introduced from Grade 2. The latter refers to a program that often divides the amount of the instruction into two languages—approximately 50% is provided in the L2 and 50% in the L1. The programs do not strictly require students to use L2 at all times. While learning, students can switch to their L1 as a tool to mediate their cognitive thinking process and to access abstract concepts related to the subject (Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011).

Met (1999) distinguishes types of programs according to the degree of integration of content and language, as shown in Figure 1. Sheltered courses aim to develop L2 efficiency while teaching subjects using supportive pedagogical techniques such as more repetition and demonstration than in regular immersion classes.



**Figure 1.** A continuum of integration of content and language (Met, 1999)

Another recognized L2 immersed program is CLIL. The program was adopted in Europe in 1994, and the European Council recommended the adoption of CLIL throughout the entire European Union afterwards (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). CLIL programs are generally provided in one or two academic subjects in *an additional language*. Most European CLIL programs are self-selecting, which means only some schools are implementing CLIL programs in one or two subjects (Ball, Kelly, & Clegg, 2015). Typically, most programs are introduced starting in high school and are taught by subject specialist teachers, who are proficient in speaking the target language. However, they are not native speakers of the language. One noticeable difference between immersion programs and CLIL is that students enter CLIL programs with a minimum level of basic L2 ability and

they already possess strong *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency* (CALP, Cummins, 2000) in their L1. This is because they are expected to be able to understand academic content making use of their available resources, basic L2 and CALP in their L1. CLIL programs aim to achieve both high levels of the target language and subject knowledge. The amount of L2 used as the medium of instruction varies depending on the students' L2 level. Teachers may use the students' L1 to support content learning (Ball et al., 2015).

The two distinct types of CBLT, immersion and CLIL, have common goals, and both support conceptual learning by occasionally shifting the language of instruction to the students' L1. Consequently, students' academic performance is assessed in terms of their acquisition of content knowledge and the language. Next, I will turn to students' outcomes following CBLT instruction.

#### **4.2. Outcomes of CBLT**

Researchers have examined the outcomes of immersion programs in terms of four components: L1 development, academic achievement, socio-psychological outcomes, and L2 development. They have found all results to be positive. These are summarized as follows (Lyster, 2007):

- 1) The immersion program does not have any negative effects on the development of students' L1.
- 2) The immersion students' academic achievement was almost equivalent to that of non-immersion students although they received instructions in L2.
- 3) The students' socio-psychological outcomes were significantly positive. Immersion students did not feel any psychological barriers with regard to the use of L2 outside the classroom and, in fact, felt confident when speaking the target language with the native speakers.
- 4) The students achieved much higher levels of L2 compared to non-immersion students. Their comprehension skills were particularly superior. They developed almost native-like abilities in listening and reading, and attained high levels of fluency. However, in terms of productive skills, they generated non-native, ungrammatical language (Lyster, 2007).

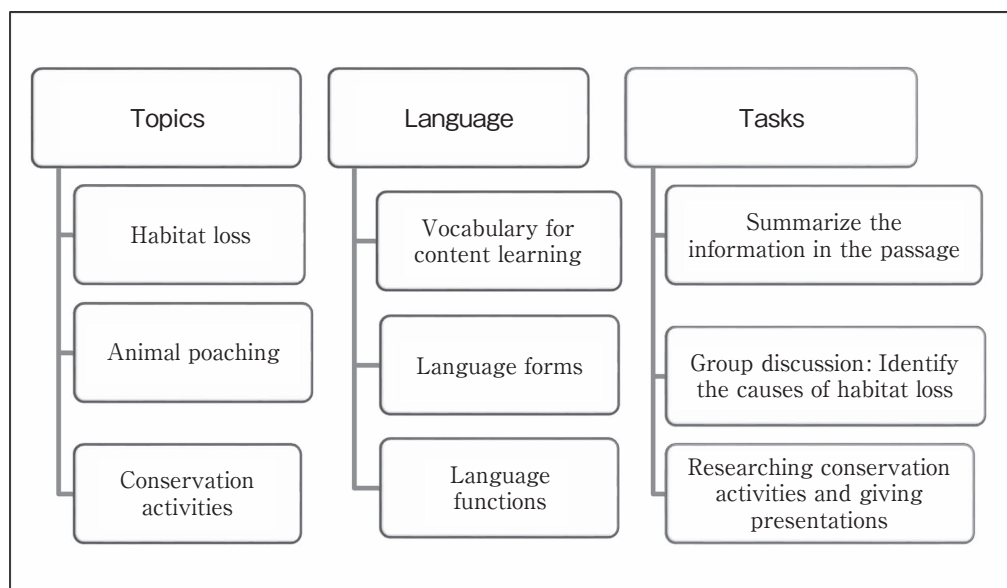
Researchers sought out the causes for the ungrammatical L2 production by the immersion students. One convincing SLA theory that supports the implementation of im-

mersion is *comprehensible input*. While learning subject matter, students receive a vast amount of comprehensible input. Nonetheless, teachers rarely teach the forms of the language. Johnson (1996) argues that “‘naturalistic’ approaches to language teaching, such as immersion, are designed to bypass the initial development of declarative knowledge and serve instead to directly develop procedural knowledge” (as cited in Lyster 2007, p.20, quotation marks in original). This may explain that why the students may have developed outstanding fluency in listening and reading but they lacked grammatical competence. Unless students receive form-focused explicit instruction and practice to apply that knowledge in multiple contexts in different cognitive operations, it is difficult to advance their productive skills further (Lightbown, 2013). Swain (1985) also addresses the role of *comprehensible output*. She argues that pushed output enables L2 learners to make linguistic hypotheses for articulating meaning, which also provides opportunities for them to pay close attention to the forms. At some point, students need to notice the gap between their language production and the correct grammatical language (Williams, 1995). Today many researchers recognize the importance of integrating focus on form instructions in communicative, meaning oriented learning contexts.

Researchers attempted to explain the effective L2 development of immersion program students as well. Snow et al. (1989) argue that language learning should be integrated with content learning because language intrinsically entails cognitive thinking. As Cammarata et al. (2016) states, contrary to traditional language programs that require students to just formulate only short sentences, CBLT affords students to intellectually use the language for constructing useful knowledge in that it may significantly contribute to cognitive development. The pedagogy of CBLT is the next topic.

## 5. An instructional framework for CBLT

Let us look back the continuum of CBLT in Figure 1. Typically content-driven programs are provided by academic subject teachers, who are proficient in the L2 whether instructing at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. Incorporating heavily content-driven CBLT programs into Japan’s public school curriculum seems unrealistic because most subject teachers are not proficient speakers of English. Moreover, it is difficult for English teachers to teach English courses in cooperation with content teachers, which is often the case in CLIL, because the number of available teachers is not sufficient, particularly in public schools.



**Figure 2.** A mapping of a sample unit entitled “Environment”

One viable option for English curriculum reforms appears to be designing a theme-based English curriculum that is centered on a big theme. Researchers suggest that themes, such as ethics, history, or human justice, can serve as feasible course materials for secondary and tertiary education (Cammarata et al., 2016). For example, when the unit plan is the environment, topics such as climate change, animal poaching, and conservation activities around the world can be used in the whole unit. One big theme can draw upon knowledge from more than one interconnected content area, e.g., natural science, geography, sociology, etc. Such unit plan can synthesize the information learned and contribute to the integration of knowledge on the environment.

To begin, teachers can brainstorm the range of topics to be included in the entire unit, and then start outlining each lesson. Throughout the unit, students will have ample opportunities to recycle the language and expand relevant content knowledge, and the topics will provide opportunities for them to discuss the problems using the language. These kinds of programs are likely to culminate in a presentational phase in which students present their own ideas formed through their research. Figure 2 is a sample unit plan on the environment, which is formulated in three dimensions, topics, language, and tasks. Table 2 shows a sample thematic unit plan template with suggestions for planning instructional frameworks.

**Table 2.**  
*A Sample Thematic Unit Plan Template*

Theme:	Topic:
<p><b>1) Content objectives:</b>  Students will be able to identify problems of ...</p> <p><b>2) Language objectives:</b>  Students will be able to use gerund/infinitive ...</p> <p><b>3) Cultural outcomes:</b>  Students will be able to compare differences between ...</p> <p><b>4) Collaborative activities and tasks:</b>  Paired problem solving, jigsaw tasks, teacher-guided reporting, discussion, group research, paired presentation, etc.</p> <p><b>5) Focus on language:</b></p> <p>a) <i>Language functions:</i>  Describing, explaining, comparing, etc. (This includes language functions which students need to use during the activities and cognitive tasks.)</p> <p>b) <i>Language forms:</i>  Past tense, prepositions, adverbs, etc.</p> <p>c) <i>Vocabulary:</i>  Habitat, poaching, etc. (This includes words students need to know to complete the activities and tasks.)</p> <p><b>6) Learning strategies:</b>  Predicting, summarizing, inferring, inquiring, skimming, etc.</p> <p><b>7) Types of scaffolding:</b>  Presenting the content visually, rephrasing, etc. (This refers to pedagogical techniques used to provide easier access to the concept.)</p> <p><b>8) Teaching materials:</b>  Textbook, additional reading materials, etc.</p> <p><b>9) Assessment:</b></p> <p><b>10) Reflections:</b></p>	

It is of critical importance to consider *learning through language and learning about language* (Gibbons, 2015). Language cannot be learned nor acquired by just providing input. Research proves incidental learning does not ensure accurate comprehension (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Unknown forms and vocabulary should be given attention to and taught directly. In this regard, it is recommended that teachers plan to teach essential functions and forms of the language and vocabulary that students are required to use during their classroom interactions.

Teaching particular skills and strategies helps students understand meanings effectively (Gibbons, 2015). Examples of these include: a) reading strategies, e.g., skimming, scanning, making inferences; b) writing skills, e.g., planning, drafting; and c) composition

strategies, e.g., knowledge on different genres and the moves of spoken discourse, and enhancing readership awareness. Through practicing repeatedly application of particular strategies, students will be able to use these skills and strategies easily and automatically.

Collaborative speaking activities provide opportunities to articulate the concepts students have learned. These have two functions. One function is to deepen the understanding of the concepts, and the other is to make students aware of a *hole*. A hole is the language that students want to express but do not know how to say it (Swain, 1985). Noticing holes is important in SLA in a context where the focus of language is on the meaning because they can direct students' attention towards particular forms. Collaborative paired speaking or paired writing activities, for example, help students notice those holes and, thus, guide them into hypothesizing sentence structures collaboratively through peer talk for expressing meaning (Gibbons, 2015)

## 6. Future directions

The key to realizing feasible implementation of CBLT programs likely depends on how far we practitioners are able to develop available resources (teaching materials) and teacher training (pedagogy). Utilizing ICT materials, including authentic materials on the Internet, appears to be a viable option. Authentic materials that deal with up-to-date, state-of-the-art scientific facts and technologies or topics on human rights and justice can open up discussion and stimulate students' motivation as well.

Furthermore, effective pedagogical techniques for CBLT programs must be developed for students to successfully learn the concepts. Scaffolding is one technique many teachers use, which includes providing visual infographic charts, demonstrations, repetition, redundant phrasing, etc. One other useful technique is switching the medium of the instruction to students' L1. Although some teachers mistakenly believe an all-English approach better facilitates L2 learning, research found this is not the case (Cummins, 2000; Lightbown, & Spada, 2013). Indeed, the occasional use of L1 enables L2 learners to access abstract concepts they have already learned about in their L1. Moreover, L1 use helps students build solid declarative knowledge. In CLIL, translanguaging practice is generally accepted, i.e., a systematic shift from one language to another for explaining abstract concepts (Coyle et al., 2010). Promising areas for investigation are how and when to switch the language to the students' L1 and the optimal balance between L1 and L2.



## 7. Conclusion

This article looked at the MEXT's latest list of English education reforms. The 2017 revision of curriculum guidelines proposes three goals across all subjects, which include: a) developing oneself, envisioning lifelong learning; b) cultivating subject knowledge; and c) promoting higher-order cognitive thinking. To realize these ends, I suggested CBLT programs as a viable option for English education reforms. Theme-based language programs can be a practical choice because they help students work with abstract contents centered around one big theme, which can provide ample opportunities to recycle language, expand content knowledge, and advance critical and reflective thinking.

CBLT enables students to learn critical contents essential for the 21st century while developing higher order thinking as well as the L2. In that respect, CBLT programs provide dual force to facilitate motivational learning. The key to success for curriculum reforms lies on the integrated learning of content and language and the systematic planning for language development. As Lyster (2007) states, by taking a counter-balanced approach between content and language learning, "second language instruction in any setting can increase its effectiveness" (p.2).

To conclude, at the moment we, as teachers, are challenged to reform English curricular more in line with the goals of English education specified by the MEXT. In order to achieve those goals, neither grammar-oriented method nor approaches to learning formal systems of language alone likely achieve communicative capabilities or critical, reflective thinking skills. In light of the MEXT's revision, teachers are required to make students not only *understand about the language* but also *use the language cognitively and intellectually*, making the most of the function that language has. That is, foreign language learning can serve as a tool for inquiring about and finding truth. Theories and research findings likely justify the implementation of CBLT programs for realizing Japan's educational reforms.

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