

# Introducing Content-Based Learning to the High School Classroom

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## Background

Many Japanese high schools still prefer the grammar-translation method of language learning. However, the landscape of education is changing; globalization is making the competition for top jobs fiercer, and Japanese students need to be given greater L2 linguistic competency to provide them with a more competitive edge on the international stage. Whatever industry they enter, they are going to need more practical English fluency.

The responsibility to implement change is on the shoulders of contemporary high school teachers, but it can be daunting when setting out to try new things—hoping to invigorate the classroom and to inspire the students. It doesn't help with the dizzying array of acronyms—CBL, CBI, EMI, EME, CLIL, ESP, EAP—once comes across when looking for modern approaches. How can a high school teacher get their head around these concepts and choose which one is best for their situation? The basic ideas behind content-based learning (CBL) will be discussed, along with the special tools and training needed. The challenges of effective CBL will also be highlighted, along with an example of how it might be implemented in Japanese high schools. For the purpose of this article CBL will be used as a blanket term for all of the respective pedagogical approaches mentioned.

## The Main Approaches

Some of the main approaches in content and immersion-focused education are CBL, CBI,

EMI, EME, CLIL and ESP. CBL stands for content-based learning and means learning content in an L2, most commonly English. CBI means content-based instruction, and refers to the instruction of content, rather than the learning. EMI is English medium instruction, and is similar to CBL, but it specifically states the L2 as English. EME is English medium education, which talks about EMI in more pedagogical terms. CLIL is content and language integrated learning, and deals with focusing on the learning outcomes of both the language and content aspects. ESP stands for English for specific purposes, and is broadly the same as EMI and CBL, with the L2 specified as English. While they all represent similarly different ideas, they share a common element—that language acquisition is not the sole learning objective.

## Special Tools and Materials

Nothing more than yourself, and your desire to improve your students' learning outcomes is needed. No new or specific ICT is required, but you can use whatever you feel comfortable with. Material-preparation is not complicated. The preparation process is the same as a regular class, except where the language and content classes interact. This is where effective collaboration will be essential.

## Special Training

A command of the core concepts and ideals of CBL should be understood, but no special training is needed. Both teachers have already

received their professional training. As long as each teacher takes responsibility roles, no new training will be needed.

### **Encountering Resistance**

It is not unrealistic to expect some resistance with new ideas. Uncooperative or unwilling PE teachers and coaches can be found in high schools throughout Japan, and indeed the world. This can be overcome with something that is already available to most high school teachers in their English departments. Since many public and private high schools in Japan still utilize the ALT/JTE system, the ALT can substitute as the role of the content teacher, enabling a trouble-free CBL project. In this case, the students are taught the language elements by the JTE, with support from the ALT, and the content is led by the ALT, with support from the JTE.

### **Putting into Practice**

So, how can CBL be put into practice at high school level? For the purpose of this example, we are going to focus on a situation where a high school basketball team is entering an international competition and the school wants to get them more prepared. The teachers first carry out a needs analysis together to determine the best way to proceed. The content teacher identifies the area they want to work on, for example team communication, and the language teacher selects appropriate grammar and vocabulary to focus on. Finally, they create an outline of the project.

### **Sample Project Outline: Basketball**

Goal: To master imperative and declarative statements for use on the basketball court.

Step 1: Students are introduced to the key vocabulary, grammar and other key concepts. The learning objectives are clearly explained to the students.

Step 2: Students practice the target content in the classroom using specially prepared materials by the language teacher.

Step 3: Students practice the target content on the basketball court in controlled groups, under the direction of the content teacher or ALT.

Step 4: Feedback and review: Group discussions are held; self-assessments are carried out.

### **Evaluation, Feedback & Review**

The content is recorded on video for feedback, self-assessment and/or peer assessment purposes. The students watch the video footage of their play, allowing them to see the results of their efforts, giving them more confidence. Teachers evaluate the students using a combination of holistic or analytical rubrics, depending on their requirements.

### **Challenges to Using CBL**

Effective CBL requires collaboration, co-operation and motivation. There are many variables, such as content, learning outcomes, and the relationship between the 'pair teachers.' A good working relationship is essential. If one or other of the teachers is not really motivated or invested in the final outcome, it will be difficult for the pair teachers to succeed in achieving their common goals. Managing the variables can be difficult, but it holds the key to success.

### **Conclusion**

It can be a daunting idea to integrate CBL into your teaching, but after a while it will become second nature, and your students will learn to love it too. It can engage students, motivate them, and connect what they learn in the classroom with what they do in the real world.