
Conference Reviews

A Review of the 2016 JALT CUE SIG Conference

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The 2016 JALT CUE SIG Conference, titled ConTENT with CONtent? Embracing Alternative Methodologies in the Modern Classroom, was held on September 25, 2016 at Kindai University, Osaka campus. From technology to pedagogy to research, this small conference offered teaching professionals a unique variety of exciting, intellectually challenging, and enriching experiences for all who attended. Sponsored by Osaka JALT, the General Union, and West Japan Cambridge Center, this symposium addressed the challenges of teaching Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content-Based Teaching (CBT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and various perspectives on Content-Based Learning (CBL) in Japan. A diverse range of topics and speakers were featured in five ESP presentations, four 45-minute and thirty 35-minute presentations, as well as ten poster presentations on subject matter related to the conference theme. The main events showcased two plenary speakers, Dr. Laurence Anthony of Waseda University and Dr. Makoto Ikeda from Sophia University whom will be highlighted in this review.

Upon arrival, guests and presenters were greeted by organizers in an exceptionally bright and friendly manner. The schedule for the entire day ran with precision due to the professionalism of the organizers, presenters and the help of proficient student staff assistants. A Cambridge book representative was present on the fourth floor to answer inquiries during breaks, and the cafeteria in the basement was open for lunch with a broad range of choices at reasonable prices. In all, the conference had a buoyant atmosphere of camaraderie among

academics and practitioners.

The morning plenary session commenced with Dr. Lawrence Anthony. An expert in corpus linguistics, educational software tools design and natural language processing, Dr. Anthony delivered an engaging morning discussion on the accelerating trends of CBL courses in Asia. With a commanding knowledge of ESP and CBL, he touched on two main dilemmas that result from a lack of qualified teachers. On one side, some courses are taught by ESL teachers without adequate knowledge of their core subjects, resulting in overly simplistic or potentially inaccurate instruction. Conversely, specialists with little or no training in language teaching can leave students frustrated in dealing with both challenging content and the ambiguous language in which it is presented. In layman's terms, he discussed the relationship between ESP and CBL in tertiary program development, including English Medium Instruction (EMI) and CLIL, and how balancing content and language can result in successfully designing courses that meet their goals for learners. To realize better success in CBL courses, he contended, a clearer vision and integration must occur between ESP and EMI.

In the later section of his talk, Dr. Anthony spoke of new approaches in bridging a gap between ESP and CBL. First, he drew attention to corpus-informed ESP such as data-driven learning that helps students discover target language that links to their particular fields of study. Additionally Dr. Anthony pointed to a growing market for online learning and new technologies for content subjects in English. Specifically, he highlighted online classes provided by Massive Open Online Course (MOOCs), one of the biggest global trends currently unfolding. As institutions struggle to find adequate teachers for their courses, Dr. Anthony suggested that quality, cost-effective courses such as MOOCs could help alleviate the dilemma of finding local subject-specialist teachers. However, he contended that learners will still need sufficient language competency and skills which require ESP teaching experts to support EMI and CLIL programs. He maintained that ESP and CBL teachers and administrators, therefore, more than ever need a clearer plan for unification and collaboration to bridge the needs of their students and create successful programs.

Dr. Anthony's talk might have been more applicable if time had allowed him to address questions concerning computer literacy skills, learning styles, and personal communication. For example, why do less than 13% or MOOC students complete their courses (Onah, Sinclair, & Boyatt, 2014)? Is online content teaching sensitive to cultural and language barriers? Moreover, how far does technology factor in personal individualities, circumstances and learning styles to make fair assessments and generate student involvement in learning? Attendees could have benefited if he had touched on some of these relevant issues. Nonetheless, Dr. Anthony's talk was insightful and offered useful suggestions for implementing technology into learning as well as merging language acquisition with content matter.

The afternoon plenary session featured Dr. Ikeda, known for his works and authorship on CLIL and competing grammars. His presentation was laced with humorous anecdotes, personal experiences and clear illustrations, which helped illustrate his main points and make a rather weighty discussion more personal and engaging. To decrease confusion between various definitions and preconceptions of CLIL, he compared his version of CLIL to a smartphone that has multiple functions in one package. Such features might include hard skills such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking, but also more communicative dexterity like critical thinking, collaborative learning, and subject-specific vocabulary that ultimately create one component of language proficiency. He demonstrated to his audience that CLIL should be a student-centered framework within what he referred to as the "4Cs": Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008). Of the four Cs, Dr. Ikeda asserted that cognition separates CLIL from traditional instruction as it encourages students to engage in critical thinking and discussion that leads learners to think in English rather than relying on recalling grammar and vocabulary. He contended that such development is of utmost importance in improving students' "soft skills" such as situational awareness and overall communicative competency. As opposed to more conventional teaching methodologies, he gave examples of how CLIL goes beyond developing learner's language knowledge by stretching into communicative competency through a task-based approach. His fundamental

challenge was to bridge the gap between CBL content and language proficiency by selecting level-appropriate materials, visuals, and tasks requiring target language that enables students to discuss what they learn within the content.

Dr. Ikeda's talk struck the heart of the conference by promoting CBL as a powerful means to fortify language acquisition and retention through student-centered learning tasks. In an era of essential benchmark tests, teachers are caught in the prevailing system that assumes that uniform tests are sufficient to measure learning. The system leans toward "hard skill" approaches to teaching with an emphasis on translation, memorization, grammar, and rote learning (Kikuchi, 2009; Hisamura, 2012). Conversely, Dr. Ikeda advocated the use of CLIL as a better medium to achieve purposeful communication skills that enable students to consider alternatives, strategize, and to think flexibly while putting their acquired language to use with their peers.

Some in attendance might have hoped for some concrete teaching strategies on how to enhance soft skills while engaging with content that focuses on hard skills. To be fair, however, every instructor has unique circumstances with varied student needs. An instructional method that works for one might not work for another. Attentive listeners would have clearly understood that Dr. Ikeda was calling on educators to reexamine their own instructional methods to strengthen student-to-student mentoring, create healthy group dynamics, foster team building, and enhance problem-solving through student-centered tasks. The presentation was most helpful in that it challenged teaching professionals to find a better balance between incorporating soft and hard skills within their personal teaching contexts.

In addition to the plenary speakers, the true essence of the conference derived from the ambience of the parallel presentations. The overall atmosphere of these sessions was not one of imparting knowledge. Rather, it resembled more of a conversation between practitioners who encounter similar issues and intricacies when dealing with communicative and content-based learning. Both paper and poster participants offered perspectives on CLT, CLIL, CBT, and ESP, providing useful approaches to the various challenges that come with teaching ESL/EFL learners. Some of the complexities that were addressed

included dealing with mixed English levels, special needs and impairments, motivation, differed learning styles, new technologies, and building better support for CLIL and CBT within curriculums. All presenters came from different walks of life, offering a broad spectrum of viewpoints and ideas that are often missing in smaller conferences of this sort. Whether one could appreciate *all* the presentations or not, one of the greatest merits of this symposium was the wide variety and diversity of the talks from which attendees could choose according to their needs and interests.

If there were a combined theme that defined the entire event, it would be that the unique challenges of CBL require high adaptability and flexibility in the interest of the learners. There is no one method that perfectly weaves together language acquisition and academic content instruction. However, creative, joint scaffolding of the two can contribute to advancing communicative skills and critical thinking. That is why the strength of this conference was that over 40 presentations offered a myriad of innovative ideas and methods to blend language acquisition and content learning. As a result, participants could adapt some of the mechanisms presented to fit their unique teaching contexts. The ultimate result is better teacher development that spills into numerous classrooms, instilling in students higher motivation and the realization of their capacities to learn and communicate.

Whether a presenter or attendee, the reviewer highly recommends educators and administrators to participate in future JALT CUE conferences. With the rise of CBL and CLIL in Japan, there will be an increasing challenge for instructors to deal with classes of mixed English competence while at the same time maintaining meaningful scholarship. Therefore, symposiums of this sort will be indispensable channels for teacher development in the years to come. The growing CBL and CLIL teaching community will need continued support that accentuates teacher development, flexibility, and adaptability to the needs of their learners. Therefore, more symposiums like the ConTENT with CONtEnt Conference are necessary to provide professionals more opportunities to explore new and tested methods to implement into their personal teaching contexts.

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