

Do OUE Students Want Content-Based Instruction? An Experimental Study

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Introduction

Content-based instruction is coming into vogue in the early 21st century in Japan, just as it did in the early Meiji era. In those days there was no choice, as neither instructors nor instructional materials were available to teach in the native language. Nowadays there is a choice, but the choice is not only that of the educational establishment, but also of those seeking education. There are really two major questions now before beginning a content-based educational program: do the students want it, and are they linguistically ready for it. This paper addresses the first question, using a survey to ask Osaka University of Economics students directly if they desire to be taught subject matter courses in English, or at least in a bilingual format.

Method

Participants

133 Osaka University of Economics undergraduates, attending a guest lecture by the senior researcher, took part in the study.

Administration

A twelve item, four point, forced choice Japanese language survey was administered after a guest lecture in Japanese, in the spring semester of the 2004 academic year. The reliability of the survey was 0.6389.

Research question

What is the interest on the part of OUE students in receiving lectures in English as part of their academic course work?

Analysis

Frequency distributions were chosen to analyze the data, using the JMP statistical program for the Macintosh computer.

Results

The items, in English translation, are presented below in exact order, with accompanying tables showing both the actual count and the corresponding percentages. Short explanations follow each table, giving the approximate percentage of respondents agreeing with the propositions

1. I would like to attend economic lectures in English.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	13	0.09774
2	51	0.38346
3	52	0.39098
4	17	0.12782

48% agreed with the statement, showing an interest in attending economics lectures in English.

2. I would prefer bilingual lectures in Japanese and English.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	34	0.25564
2	61	0.45865
3	35	0.26316
4	3	0.02256

More than 71% of the students would like to have bilingual lectures, meaning lectures using both English and Japanese.

3. Lectures in Japanese are better for understanding economic theory.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	33	0.24812
2	76	0.57143
3	23	0.17293
4	1	0.00752

More than 82% of the respondents prefer economics lectures in Japanese.

4. It is important to know English for finding a good job.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	62	0.46617
2	56	0.42105
3	12	0.09023
4	3	0.02256

89% believe that English knowledge is important for finding a job.

(the responses agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposition). This was done to demonstrate support (or lack of) for our research question; “What is the interest on the part of OUE students in receiving lectures in English as part of their academic course work?”

For response we offered four choices: 1. strongly agree, 2. agree, 3 disagree, 4 strongly disagree

5. I would be able to understand an English lecture with an English transcript beforehand.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	57	0.42857
2	62	0.46617
3	9	0.06767
4	5	0.03759

90% of our OUE subjects believe that having access to a transcript before attending English lectures would help them in understanding the foreign language material.

6. I am interested in attending an occasional guest lecturer (in English) but not for a whole semester.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	22	0.16667
2	62	0.46970
3	44	0.33333
4	4	0.03030

63% of the students showed an interest in attending occasional lectures in English as part of their semester course work.

7. I am interested in attending English lecturers for the whole semester term.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	12	0.09023
2	31	0.23308
3	67	0.50376
4	23	0.17293

About 32% of the respondents would be interested in attending a semester long economics course taught in English.

8. I would enroll in a class when English lecture material is included on the final exam.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	4	0.03008
2	30	0.22556
3	72	0.54135
4	27	0.20301

26% of the students say they would enroll in an economics class with a final exam based on the English lectures.

9. I would be interested in taking a class featuring English lectures as a non-credit auditor.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	29	0.21805
2	73	0.54887
3	27	0.20301
4	4	0.03008

77% of the students showed an interest in taking a non-credit class based on English lectures.

10. Listening to a lecturer in English helps my English ability.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	32	0.24060
2	73	0.54887
3	23	0.17293
4	5	0.03759

79% of the participants believe that attending economics lectures in English would improve their English proficiency.

11. Listening to an English lecturer is a good way to improve my knowledge of economics.

Response	Count	Percentage
1	22	0.16541
2	79	0.59398
3	25	0.18797
4	7	0.05263

76% of the students agree that attending English lectures would improve their knowledge of economics.

12. Listening to oral English lectures is a waste of my time.

Response	Count	Percentage
2	15	0.11450
3	76	0.58015
4	40	0.30534

Fully 89% of the respondents oppose the idea, that attending economic lectures in English would be a "waste of time" for them.

Discussion

The results of this survey, although presenting a mixed picture, do indicate a desire on the part of OUE students to attend subject matter lectures in English. The first three items deal directly with the language of instruction. Almost half (48%) of the respondents would be inter-

ested in lectures in English and almost three-quarters (71%) would like to receive bilingual lectures. Also 82% of the students think that lessons held in English would be beneficial to their theoretical understanding of economics. Item three presents, of course, an anomaly. Common sense tells us that students should prefer lectures in their mother tongue to lectures in a poorly understood (in the case of our OUE students) foreign language. Most probably these students thought about either-or-case, where being lectured in English means not getting lectured in Japanese at all. It is natural to assume that they would prefer their main lectures in Japanese.

Items six through nine deal with curriculum. These particular OUE students do not show a strong interest in attending full semester, full credit economics courses conducted in English (32% showed a desire to attend semester long courses in English, and 26% agreed that English lecture material should be on the final exam). They, however, did show strong interest in attending occasional guest lectures in English (item #6) as well as in attending non-credit courses in English (item #9). There was substantial support for these items (63% and 77% respectively).

Turning to the perceived value of content-based English instruction in economics, we find that on the whole the participants strongly feel that subject matters lectures in English would be beneficial in acquiring English. More than 79% felt that attending English lectures would improve their English ability (item #10). They also believe that access to written transcripts would improve their understanding of English based lectures (item #5). Furthermore, over 76% believe that attending English lectures would help them in their economics studies (item #11). In other words, a large majority of these students considers content-based instruction in economics as beneficial towards improving their English as well as their knowledge of economics.

Looking at a final item (#4): "It is important to know English for finding a good job.", we find a very common result; 89% of the respondents are convinced that English is important for job placement. This goes hand and hand with the accepted wisdom, exposed by the educational establishment, the Ministry of Education, and the whole English teaching industry, not to mention the media and society in general. This whole traditional establishment tells the students that they need good English to get a good job. And if the students themselves believe it, there is a need ready to be filled by schools and their respective faculties in using this instrumental motivation of finding a good job upon graduation to motivate our OUE students to study English. It is beyond the scope of this paper to further dissect the implications of this finding, but if the results presented here are generalizable, content-based instruction might be the newest trend in Japanese English education, and a potential answer to Japan's perceived need for internationalization.

Finally, to answer our research question, set out at the beginning of this paper, yes, there is an expressed desire on the part of the student body to attend lectures in English. Item #1 indicates this directly, with nearly half of the respondents answering in the affirmative. It is also supported in item #12, where 89% said that English lectures were not a 'waste of time'. A large majority of students are strongly interested in bilingual lectures. According to our questionnaire, 3/4 of the respondents find this kind of lecture interesting. Nevertheless, these

students seem reluctant to attend full semester courses conducted in English (item #7) and do not wish to be formally tested on material presented in English (item #8). They do show a strong interest in attending non-credit lectures in English, however (item #9). On the whole, we believe there is sufficient support among the polled student body, to recommend experimental elective (as opposed to required) courses taught in English. If these are established, carefully monitored and assessed to measure learning of both the economics material covered and gains in English proficiency, we believe there may indeed be sound reasons for initiating content based classes taught in English at OUE.

This was an experimental study, and as such there naturally occurred faults, which should be corrected in a larger, follow up study. For one thing, the reliability of the instrument was not as high as we would desire (0.6389). We would like a reliability of at least .70, and preferably higher. Adding additional items and reworking of some of the existing items should insure this. It is of interest to ask students, for example, if they would also enroll in bilingual classes when the material covered is also included on the final exam. Corresponding mirrored item should also be included on a revised survey to better check the reliability of these particular items. We should include items looking at both required and elective English lectures, to clear up any ambiguity.

Conclusion

133 OUE economics majors were administered a twelve item forced choice survey to measure their desire to attend economics lectures in English. Majority support was found for this proposition in items #2, #4, #10, #11 (and indirectly in item #12), and significant minority support in additional items. Participants supported content-based instruction as a means to improve their English proficiency. Interestingly many students wish also to improve their understanding of economics subject matter at English lecture. Any additional item (#4) indicated, OUE-students support strongly the popular belief, that English ability is important in job placement.

This paper recommends that experimental, elective courses using English as the medium of instruction should be established.

References

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