

CONTENT BASED INSTRUCTION IN EFL CONTEXTS

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Introduction

Content based instruction (CBI) is a teaching method that emphasizes learning *about something* rather than learning *about language*. Although CBI is not new, there has been an increased interest in it over the last ten years, particularly in the USA and Canada where it has proven very effective in ESL immersion programs. This interest has now spread to EFL classrooms around the world where teachers are discovering that their students like CBI and are excited to learn English this way.

Content Based Information (CBI) is a powerful innovation in acquiring & enhancing a language. In its best form, language lessons are blended with stimulating content. The students focus on the subject matter than the language learning process. Supporting students' success by engaging them in challenging & informative activity helps them learn complex skills. The students learn language automatically.

Keeping the students motivated & interested in the language training is the profound advantage of CBI. When students are interested & motivated in the material they are learning, they make greater connections to life situations, learning language becomes a fun & easy activity, information is retained for long time.

According to educational psychologists the only way to learn a language is through a subject we are passionate about. And this is especially true for adult English learners. Hence, learning a language in contemporary classrooms is not effective. Classroom's pattern of teaching is limited to grammar, reading & comprehension. The students are not particularly interested in the subject content & have few practical applications.

In recent years content-based instruction has become increasingly popular as a means of developing linguistic ability. It has strong connections to project work, task-based learning and a holistic approach to language instruction and has become particularly popular within the state school secondary (11 - 16 years old) education sector.

What is content-based instruction?

Although CBI alone does not lead directly to learner independence, one of its primary strengths is that approaches that do foster independent learning can be incorporated into CBI. Another strength of CBI is that it can be implemented in a variety of teaching contexts. CBI has been proven effective in programs for English for Specific Purposes (ESP), vocational and workplace education in both first and second language learning, bilingual education, sheltered instruction, and college-level foreign language instruction. Factors that demonstrate its success include high teacher and student interest, program enrollment, and student adjustment to future academic contexts (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Underlying CBI's success is what Oxford and Scarcella (1992) call "depth of learning--the notion that if students are actively engaged in meaningful, related theme-based tasks, they gain repeated exposure to

The Proceedings of National Seminar on English Language Teaching "The Best Method"

7th May 2011, Tuban, East Java, Indonesia

language that helps them to process the language” (p. 6). Both Cummins (1994) and Grabe and Stoller (1997) note that Krashen’s (1983) comprehensible input hypothesis gives support to CBI. This hypothesis states that, “We acquire by understanding language a bit beyond our current level of competence. This is done with the help of context” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p. 37). This hypothesis supports the context-embedded language teaching prescribed by CBI. Snow, Met and Genesee (1989) use the image of *cognitive hangers* to express the need for language structures to be taught in a meaningful context. Integrating content and language provides students with repeated, natural exposure to the language which mirrors the environment of first language acquisition.

CBI also offers a variety of opportunities to engage in meaningful communication with others (Met, 1991; Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). Finally, CBI is beneficial to 11 - 16 years old ESL students who are expected to learn subject matter knowledge as they are acquiring English. For these students it does not make sense to postpone the teaching of content material until after they have learned English (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). In fact, learning language through content provides an opportunity to teach academic tasks and higher order thinking skills (Met, 1991). Thus, the integrated teaching of language and content is not only beneficial for ESL students, but also necessary for students’ overall success in school.

Several research studies support the integration of content and language in second language learning and overall academic achievement for ESL students. Raphan and Moser (1993/94) provide positive evidence in the form of student responses to a college-level class combining language and content instruction in art history. Kasper (1994, 1995/96) demonstrates more empirical data from studies involving ESL students in paired ESL reading classes and mainstream psychology classes at a community college. The results show that more students who were in the paired classes passed the ESL reading class than those who were only in the ESL reading class.

The students in the paired classes also scored significantly higher on the final reading assessment test. Kasper (1997) did a follow-up study with these same subjects to track their performance in subsequent mainstream classes. Comparing students who had taken paired ESL and content classes to those who had taken ESL classes alone, she shows that the students from paired classes scored higher on both reading and writing assessment tests. More students from paired classes progressed to the mainstream composition class. Of those students, many more from the paired class passed the composition course and overall, they received higher grades in the course. Finally, the study demonstrates that more students from paired classes go on to graduate. These studies indicate both the short-term effectiveness and long-term benefits of integrating language teaching with content instruction.

Despite the many benefits of content-based instruction, it also has shortcomings. McKeon (1994) has pointed out that CBI is not enough because ESL students face a greater cognitive challenge than native speakers when learning content in their second language. Middle and high school ESL students require academic skills in conjunction with language and content in order to be successful. These skills include higher order thinking skills, learning strategies (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Kinsella (1997) has criticized CBI for being too *teacher driven*. She argues that ESL teachers adjust teaching materials to make them accessible to their students rather than teaching their students the skills of learning on their own. She states that, despite the effectiveness of CBI in contextualizing language and making input comprehensible, this practice does not create independent learners:

These modifications of instructional delivery place the bulk of the responsibility on the teacher, and while facilitating short-term comprehension, they do not necessarily contribute to the ESL students' ability to confidently and competently embark on independent learning endeavors... (pp. 50-51).

Kinsella goes on to say that ESL teachers who fail to do more than make their lessons engaging and understandable inadvertently act as *institutional gatekeepers*. As long as ESL teachers do the work of making material accessible, their students will not gain the skills needed to approach the material independently. CBI alone, without the integration of academic skills instruction, does not foster self-directed learners. In not teaching them how to be autonomous learners, it fails to prepare them for learning outside of the ESL classroom.

In my personal experience in teaching at a high school, as well as at the elementary level and with adult learners, I have also seen evidence of the strengths and weaknesses of content based instruction. In my experience at the high school level, no systematic coordination exists between teachers of content area subjects and ESL teachers. In general, ESL teachers, including myself, choose thematic unit topics without taking into consideration the needs of students in content area classes. Thus, we miss out on an opportunity to help our students in the classes where they most need support. I have also observed many positive results to teaching thematic units. First, I have noticed that student interest is higher throughout all activities of the unit than when doing activities that are not related by a common theme.

Students are more enthusiastic about, and therefore, more successful with reading and writing activities in thematic units because these skills are easier to accomplish when the topic is context-embedded and students have ample background knowledge about it. Students' retention of vocabulary, language structures and key concepts is also better in thematic units. I believe that this is due to the recycling of language and ideas throughout the unit and to the fact that activities address a range of learning styles and include hands-on and interactive group work. CBI lends itself to the incorporation of group work, particularly cooperative learning, which is an effective way of teaching content and language.

The focus of a CBI lesson is on the topic or subject matter. During the lesson students are focused on learning about something. This could be anything that interests them from a serious science subject to their favourite pop star or even a topical news story or film. They learn about this subject using the language they are trying to learn, rather than their native language, as a tool for developing knowledge and so they develop their linguistic ability in the target language. This is thought to be a more natural way of developing language ability and one that corresponds more to the way we originally learn our first language.

What does a content-based instruction lesson look like?

There are many ways to approach creating a CBI lesson. This is one possible way.

1. Preparation

- a. Choose a subject of interest to students.
- b. Find three or four suitable sources that deal with different aspects of the subject. These could be websites, reference books, audio or video of lectures or even real people.

2. During the lesson

- a. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group a small research task and a source of information to use to help them fulfill the task.
- b. Then once they have done their research they form new groups with students that used other information sources and share and compare their information.
- c. There should then be some product as the end result of this sharing of information which could take the form of a group report or presentation of some kind.

What are the advantages or benefits of content-based instruction?

It can make learning a language more interesting and motivating. Students can use the language to fulfill a real purpose, which can make students both more independent and confident.

Students can also develop a much wider knowledge of the world through CBI which can feed back into improving and supporting their general educational needs.

CBI is very popular among EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teachers as it helps students to develop valuable study skills such as note taking, summarizing and extracting key information from texts. Taking information from different sources, re-evaluating and restructuring that information can help students to develop very valuable thinking skills that can then be transferred to other subjects.

The inclusion of a group work element within the framework given above can also help students to develop their collaborative skills, which can have great social value.

Benefits of CBI:

1. Learners are exposed to a considerable amount of language through stimulating content. Learners explore interesting content & are engaged in appropriate language-dependant activities. Learning language becomes automatic.
2. CBI supports contextualized learning; learners are taught useful language that is embedded within relevant discourse contexts rather than as isolated language fragments. Hence students make greater connections with the language & what they already know. This enhances the practical usability for the learners.
3. Complex information is delivered through real life context for the students to grasp well & leads to intrinsic motivation.
4. In CBI information is reiterated by strategically delivering information at right time & situation compelling the students to learn out of passion.
5. Greater flexibility & adaptability in the curriculum can be deployed to suit students interest.

What are the potential problems?

Because CBI isn't explicitly focused on language learning, some students may feel confused or may even feel that they aren't improving their language skills. Deal with this by including some form of language focused follow-up exercises to help draw attention to linguistic features within the materials and consolidate any difficult vocabulary or grammar points.

Particularly in monolingual classes, the overuse of the students' native language during parts of the lesson can be a problem. Because the lesson isn't explicitly focused on

language practice students find it much easier and quicker to use their mother tongue. Try sharing your rationale with students and explain the benefits of using the target language rather than their mother tongue.

It can be hard to find information sources and texts that lower levels can understand. Also the sharing of information in the target language may cause great difficulties. A possible way around this at lower levels is either to use texts in the students' native language and then get them to use the target language for the sharing of information and end product, or to have texts in the target language, but allow the students to present the end product in their native language. These options should reduce the level of challenge.

Some students may copy directly from the source texts they use to get their information. Avoid this by designing tasks that demand students evaluate the information in some way, to draw conclusions or actually to put it to some practical use. Having information sources that have conflicting information can also be helpful as students have to decide which information they agree with or most believe.

The Theme Based Model

Theme based CBI is usually found in EFL contexts. Theme based CBI can be taught by an EFL teacher or team taught with a content specialist. The teacher(s) can create a course of study designed to unlock and build on their own students' interests and the content can be chosen from an enormous number of diverse topics.

Theme based CBI is taught to students with TEFL scores usually in the range 350 to 500. These scores are lower than the TEFL 500 score which is often the minimum requirement for students who want to study at universities in English L1 contexts. Because of the lower proficiency level of these students, a standard "mainstream" course, such as "Introduction to Economics" will have to be redesigned if it is to be used in a theme based EFL class. For example, complicated concepts can be made easier to understand by using posters and charts, (Mercerize, 2000, p.108).

Syllabus Design for Theme Based CBI

Here is the syllabus for a theme based CBI class which combined with KTSP especially for Speaking skill:

1. Competence Standard
 - Mengungkapkan makna dalam teks fungsional pendek dan monolog berbentuk *narrative, explanation dan discussion* dalam konteks kehidupan sehari-hari
2. Basic Competence
 - Mengungkapkan makna dalam teks fungsional pendek resmi dan tidak resmi yang menggunakan ragam bahasa lisan secara akurat, lancar dan berterima dalam konteks kehidupan sehari-hari.
 - Mengungkapkan makna dalam teks monolog yang menggunakan ragam bahasa lisan secara akurat, lancar dan berterima dalam konteks kehidupan sehari-hari, berbentuk; *narrative, explanation dan discussion*
3. Teaching Materials

Listening text monolog in the form of; *narrative, explanation and discussion*

4. Learning Activities

- Explain the monolog texts: *narrative, explanation and discussion*.
- Discuss the content of the texts through listening or oral materials with the partner of in a group.
- In a group the students explain about something that they are discussing
- Make a debate contest between group to discuss about the topic or theme given before.

5. Indicators

- Explain the topic or theme orally in the form of *narrative, explanation and discussion*
- Explain the information of the text orally
- Tell the purpose of the texts orally
- Give an opinion or idea
- Discussion the topic or theme

6. Sources

- Newspaper
- Magazine
- Television
- Internet
- Book references

Materials for Theme based CBI

There are textbooks that can be used for theme based CBI classes which usually contain a variety of readings followed by vocabulary and comprehension exercises. These can then be supplemented with additional information from the Internet, newspapers and other sources. However, another approach is to use specially constructed source books which contain collections of authentic materials or simplified versions. These can be about a particular theme such as drug use or care of the elderly, or about more general topics.

It's possible to create some really interesting classroom materials as long as the need for comprehensibility is not forgotten.

How Can Theme Based CBI Be Assessed?

A theme based CBI course should have both content and language goals. Student progress can then be assessed when classes are underway. Continuous assessment is effective. Daily quizzes can be used to check that content information is getting through to the students and that they are remembering important vocabulary. Longer tests may also be given at mid-term and at the end of the term.

Journals are also a useful diagnostic tool. Students can be given time at the end of each class to write a summary of the content of the lesson or to answer a specific question given by the teacher. Another useful exercise is to allow the students to write freely on any topic; teachers can then read their work and assess their progress indirectly.

Direct oral feedback during the classes can be useful as long as we are mindful of the proficiency level of the students; it's all too easy to forget how difficult it is to speak a foreign language in front of classmates.

Summary

CBI is an effective method of combining language and content learning. Theme based CBI works well in EFL contexts, and its use will increase as teachers continue to design new syllabus in response to student needs and interests. The learner motivation increases when students are learning about something, rather than just studying language. Theme based CBI is particularly appealing in this respect because teachers can use almost any content materials that they feel their students will enjoy. What can be better than seeing our students create something and learn language at the same time?

While CBI can be both challenging and demanding for the teacher and the students, it can also be very stimulating and rewarding. The degree to which you adopt this approach may well depend on the willingness of your students, the institution in which you work and the availability of resources within your environment. It could be something that your school wants to consider introducing across the curriculum or something that you experiment with just for one or two lessons. Whichever you choose to do, It is advised that the teachers try to involve other teachers within your school, particularly teachers from other subjects. This could help you both in terms of finding sources of information and in having the support of others in helping you to evaluate your work.

The integration of language & content teaching is perceived by the European Commission as "an excellent way of making progress in a foreign language". CBI effectively increases learners' English language proficiency & teaches them the skills necessary for the success in various professions. With CBI, learners gradually acquire greater control of the English language, enabling them to participate more fully in an increasingly complex academic & social environment.

Lastly, try to involve your students. Get them to help you decide what topics and subjects the lessons are based around and find out how they feel this kind of lessons compares to your usual lessons. In the end they will be the measure of your success.

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