Content-based language learning, pitfalls and strengths

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(minor page formatting differences exist between this version and the printed proceedings)

Introduction
Since the early 1960s, the English Language Teaching (ELT) profession has been enmeshed in a series of teaching methodology controversies, where the term “approaches” has become one of the distinguishing factors. These have included some common or similar underlying perspectives but contrasting classroom applications, as well as some similar applications from different theories (see Larsen-Freeman, 1986/2001, Richards and Rodgers, 1986/2001, and Stevick, 1980, for detailed discussions). In a similar vein, though somewhat removed, have been several pedagogical designs somewhat removed from the methodology/approach because they challenge different assumptions, this list could include task-based learning and content-based instruction (CBI, also known as content-based language teaching or content-based language instruction, content and language integrated instruction (CLIL), as well as immersion, or integrated language and content). CBI may be distinguished from the methodologies and task-based learning in that it makes no assumptions of teacher or learner behaviors, only of the materials used for instruction.

Seeking a definition, one is overwhelmed with competing descriptions and requirements. I have previously written “content-based instruction has yet to have established a clear definition of what it is, and what it is not” (Dickey, 2001, 50), a situation which has remained unchanged. Since in this same article I discussed some of the many definitions, there’s no need to re-introduce them here. I have selected the following definition to serve for this paper, though some might challenge this definition as holding too little “language teaching” focus:

an educational approach in which non-language subjects are taught through a foreign, second or other additional language

(Marsh et al., 2001).

Another definition with a clearly different orientation, one that, when contrasted with Marsh, gives a feel for differing perspectives, is:

content is the point of departure or organizing principle of the course

(Master, 1997/8).

These two concepts may lean toward one side in a continuum or gradient, when considering language and content: as the learning focus for one element increases it must necessarily decrease elsewhere. This becomes still more obvious when we consider where the learner’s attention must be focused.
It would be important to note that many would argue the thrust of the lessons: is it using language to teach content, or content to teach language? Various descriptions of teaching aim are available, each of the following could replace “content” with “language,” and vice-versa.

- content-driven
- language-focused
- language-based
- content-oriented

Some would use the term “weak form” when talking about content-based instruction, though I must admit I’m not sure if this means “weak language” or “weak content.” The concepts listed above also suggest a number of issues, which we now visit.

**Issues**

Perhaps the most obvious, yet most argued, aspect of content-based instruction is the definition of “content.” There are at least three general areas of teacher interest within the academic environment (primary and secondary schools, college and university):

1. academic subjects
2. academic skills
3. other skills & contents

and under the third we might consider such overlapping ideas as

- general purposes language learning
- media (tv commercials, movies, newspapers, web-pages)
- techno-skills (e.g., computer & internet skills, using a camcorder…)
- task/activity language learning (labs, experiential learning, tasks)

There is, of course, considerable disagreement on what constitutes “academic subjects”: is it only those fields of study traditionally associated with “majors” in various universities? Could it include such matters as “swimming” where athletics is an accepted course of study? And of course, within the vocational environments, things like “auto repair” or “welding” would appear no less appropriate.

Academic skills would fall under the general themes of “English for Academic Purposes.” Lecture note-taking, preparing reports, reading academic texts, all with particular interest in genre, are the primary area of interest.

An area of less discussion is that of content duration. While there are a few discussions of sustained content, it is without doubt that most language teachers are far more interested in short-term content, what is known as “topic” or “theme” based instruction. My working definition, supported in the literature where such distinction is made, would be that topics run for periods up to one or possibly two weeks, whereas themes run for several weeks, which is to say, there would be several themes over a semester. Similar confusion appears in the ELT literature over the distinctions and durations of tasks and projects. One might even find teachers who use content only part-time, a few minutes in a class session, or one class session per week.

Duration of content invites consideration of source of content. Once a theme has been chosen—for example, psychology—how closely related are each content materials tied to this theme? Do they come from similar sources (e.g., college level coursebooks, newspapers, professional/scholarly journals versus popular magazines, tv programs)? How closely
related are each classes materials? How narrow is the topic, are we looking at “university student anxiety” or “psychology” as a general field? If psychology is the general theme, does the course overview many different areas, or are these tied somehow?

Perhaps the most combative of the issues is the question of lesson focus (note the terms offered above). Again referring the reader to the article by this author cited earlier, we may observe that there is considerable difference in perspective, between those who would argue that “learners must be aware that they are learning English” and those who would see explicit language teaching as merely an occasional event, at most (see Han & Dickey, 2001), a weak form of Michael Long’s Focus on Form (FonF).

Cognitive load clearly becomes an area of concern when considering lesson focus, as it would be inappropriate to burden learners with quite challenging content at the same time as they are struggling with the language itself. Although there might be exceptions to this generalization, teachers generally find themselves looking for course guidance: is this a “language learning course” or are students supposed to master the content at a level equivalent to those studying in their own L1? Does this course attempt the “native speaker of English” environment (such as is often the case in the Foreign Language Medium Instruction courses described in Han & Dickey, 2001)? I like to refer to this issue as “intensity of language” and “intensity of content,” where intensity refers to amount (if not L2-only class) and difficulty of each language point, and amount (pace of instruction) and possibly challenge of the content, particularly where the course aims to develop such new areas of learner skills as “creativity” or (western) “logic/critical thinking skills.”

**Figure 1: Intensity of Cognitive Load**

![Intensity of Cognitive Load](image)

The previous two paragraphs lead, inevitably, to the issue of testing. There are always the questions of “teaching to the test” (presumed bad) versus “testing what hasn’t been taught” (also bad). If this is a language class using content, then presumably the test should be predominantly about language, and students should know this before the test. The reverse position is also true, if this is a content course using L2, then students should know beforehand that the test is about the content. In some cases, instructors may even decide to
create a test in the L1, ascertaining that productive skills in the L2 might fall short, and the
test itself is to ascertain mastery of the content (which might be better assessed in L1).

And always an issue for content-based instruction is the level of teacher qualification in the
content area, which is one of the reasons why many language teachers choose to go with
shorter-term (thematic) content. The same issue is true, of course, for content-area teachers
attempting to integrate language learning in the course, though it would seem that, in the
Asian context at least, expatriate “native-speaker” language teachers would be in a better
position to teach content (since so many have undergraduate degrees in fields other than
language) than content teachers would be to teach language (assuming they have had no
formal studies in teaching language, but have been successful English language learners).

Equally an issue, for teachers of English and teachers of “content” alike, is how to
implement content-based instruction within the classroom. There are literally dozens of
papers floating about in Asia alone on how CBI has been implemented, but more importantly,
there are hundreds of teachers asking where to begin. In a workshop conducted in Echague,
Philippines last month (March) I encouraged language and contents teachers to consider how
one element in the community (school, neighborhood, the classroom itself) could be utilized
to create a single lesson, the classic “topic-based” class. It would seem that, for those not in
a position to create a class dedicated to an ongoing theme or themes (basically, most folks
outside of tertiary schools), the isolated topical class, running parallel to the materials in the
designed syllabus, is an opportunity to take advantage of some of the learner-interest merits
of content (assuming the topic is of interest to the learners!).

Non-issues
No less important than the issues in CBI are what I would refer to as “non-issues. There are
a number of items that really aren’t much different in a CBI course from another other
language course. While only the limits of the imagination delineate all that are potential
discussion points, here we limit ourselves to three.

Earlier in the paper we introduced the fact that there have been so many methods and
approaches in ELT. The good news is that CBI is not limited to any particular teaching style
or design. CBI is more about syllabus design, the choices that are made about what will be
studied. The how is left to other considerations, though for those using technology as a
content-source, there will be some limitations based on access to the requisite technology.

Similarly, instructional materials are not dictated by CBI other than how such materials fit
within the overall CBI framework selected. Two books relating to “English and Law” serve
as an example. Riley’s (1991) *English for law* is clearly organized around academic skills,
with readings from legal texts to practice such work. Russell and Locke’s (1995) *English law
and language*, on the other hand, appears to be based on particular subject areas of English
law, with numerous language activities following each reading. Other teachers could choose,
as I have done, to create their own study materials from a variety of source materials,
including, for example, court decisions and legal references, published parliamentary or
municipal statues, drivers’ handbooks, etc.

Pitfalls and Strengths
Hopefully the above discussion has pointed out some of the considerations of using content-
based instruction. But it has not answered the “why.” Generally, content-based instruction
is utilized to accomplish at least one of the following aims:
1. prepare learners for an immersion environment (“native speaker schools”);
2. prepare learners to write on their subject area in world-class foreign language journals;
3. motivate learners through use of interesting topics/materials outside of traditional language study areas;
4. other campus purposes (which may have little relation to the learners).

Content-based instruction is not a panacea for all the ills of language learning, and in fact may clearly be a challenge to implement appropriately and well. Materials and qualified teachers are critical. Content-based is not an equivalent to L2-only (English-only), here too there are choices to be made. One of those choices might well be team-teaching, either matching a language expert with a content-expert, or a “native-speaker” with a bilingual.

The many options available in content-based instruction, ranging from simple classroom management (“Classroom English”) through use of short and enjoyable activities such as comics, videos, trivia games and topics or themes such as “The environment” and extending all the way to sustained full-content courses such as law, history, ancient, ethics, and science, however, mean that there are interesting opportunities available for nearly all teachers, and all students. One challenge is surely garnering support from administrators and peers for the program, recognizing that traditional language learning objectives may be slighted in order to bring about more holistic language growth. The same can be said for any change in methodology or approach. However, in the case of CBI there can be something for everyone if the definition of “content” is stretch far enough to include things like literature… something that I wasn’t prepared to accept three years ago, but have since reconsidered. After all, is not literature a traditional university subject? The question becomes, instead, what are the learning objectives, and how do these fit within the content-learning concept?

References

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