

Content-Based Instruction: An Approach to My Classroom

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Abstract

Content-based Instruction (CBI) is a teaching method in which the teacher uses English (a foreign or second language) as a means to teach the subject matter for each of his or her courses. In response to English as a global language, English competency is undoubtedly essential to all teachers, including native Thai teachers. Many good English language programs are waiting for Thai teachers to serve as their lecturers. But learning English will be a challenging job for both current school teachers and new teachers. The purpose of this article is to address the concepts of CBI and share some information according to the following topics: What is CBI? Why did I need CBI for my class? What kind of CBI do I use? How can theme based CBI be assessed? And finally, what are some teaching method and strategies used by CB teachers, some Teacher's tips, and some class activities?

Keyword

Content-based Instruction (CBI) teaching method

Introduction

I am a Thai teacher of English language. I recently had a chance to teach a class of native Chinese students who could not speak Thai. I was assigned to teach Technical Terms of Business English. This course was a survey of useful technical terms in certain business areas such as marketing, management, accounting, and tourism. This group of students was in the second year of their bachelor's degree majoring in Business English. Their English proficiency was not highly developed. They would be called Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) students.

The number of LEP students in Thailand schools has increased dramatically in recent years. This includes many larger schools in Chiang Mai that currently have at least one or two English classes at each level. This means many teachers are now teaching English language classes. Furthermore, many schools use bilingual education; bilingual programs have been effective in developing both English proficiency and academic competency by instructing many classes in a target language, such as English. Definitely content-based English instruction has played an important role until now (I think you should cut this sentence). All schools and school districts are faced with the task of preparing these LEP students to keep up academically with their native English-speaking peers. One way to help LEP students succeed academically is to recognize the need to develop their cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)--the kind of proficiency required to make sense of academic language in context-reduced situations (Cummins, 1979, 1981). In America, CALP can take up to seven years to acquire; even "advantaged" non-English-speakers require 5-8 years to score as well as native speakers on standardized tests (Collier, 1987). Accordingly, if teachers of English as a second language (ESL) focus solely on developing students' linguistic competence, the students may fall too far behind in other academic subjects to ever catch up.

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What is CBI?

Content-based Instruction (CBI) is a teaching method in which the teacher uses English, a foreign or second language, as a means to convey subject content in any particular subject matter. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) propose that Saint Augustine was an early proponent of Content-Based Language Teaching and quote his recommendations regarding the necessity to focus on meaningful language teaching content. Language can be taught through any subject matter and the students can learn the language as a byproduct of learning about real-world content (Widdowson commented in 1978:16). Stephen Davies said, (Stephen Davies, 2003), 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 increase of interest in it over the last ten years, particularly in the United States 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 have discovered that their students enjoy CBI and are excited to learn English this way. This coincides with the definition of CBI as "...the integration of particular content with language teaching aims... the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills" (Brinton et al., 1989, p. 2). Another definition is given by Crandall & Tucker that CBI is "...an approach to language instruction that integrates the presentation of topics or tasks from subject matter classes (e.g., math, social studies) within the context of teaching a second or foreign language" (Crandall & Tucker, 1990, p. 187).

Why did I need CBI for my class?

This group of students was from China. They could not speak any Thai so the communication in the class could only be in the English language. As the course was designed to give learners an introduction to different fields of business content, they needed to know technical terms used in context and use themselves in class presentations. This presented me with the question of what teaching approach could I use for the course. I decided that content-based instruction would perfectly serve this kind of teaching. CBI is an effective method of combining language and content learning. Stephen B. Stryker Betty Lou Leaver, (1997) said that CBI curriculum characteristics can be described as 1) based on subject-matter core, 2) using authentic language and texts, and 3) is appropriate to the needs of specific groups of students. All three characteristics are essential for success.

Traditional language teaching instruction mainly focuses on grammar translation teaching methods. This can only help the learner pass exams and have skills when taking test. As a result, the learners will not be able to use the language to communicate as well as the objectives set. This is similar to what Swaffar said (in Krueger and Ryan 1993) when he distinguishes between the top-down approach of CBI, in which students are taught with the overall meaning of the contents before attending to sentence level and vocabulary, and the bottom-up approach of traditional language instruction, in which focus is placed mainly on the words and syntactic structures within sentences. (adapted from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Davies-CBI.html>.)

Additionally, Canale and Swain (1980) explain that CBI is especially suitable for facilitating the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) while simultaneously focusing on the functional use of language in authentic settings. EFL teachers should design various teaching activities that combine four modes (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in order to enhance students' literacy, oral development, and thinking skills positively.

In short, CBI employs English at a comprehensible level so as to increase students' understanding of the subject matter and build up language skills simultaneously. In addition, research (Custodio & Sutton, 1998) has shown that CBI often uses authentic tasks centered around authentic materials in order to help language minority students increase their motivation, and provide more opportunities for them to explore prior knowledge. Therefore, the use of the CBI can be effective in EFL classrooms.

What kind of CBI did I use?

The following are the contemporary models of content-based instruction for courses at the university level. They are theme-based language instruction and include: sheltered content instruction, adjunct language instruction, team-teaching approach, and skilled-based approach.

Theories and models to support CBI in ESL and bilingual settings are now common. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) describe three models for CBI at multiple levels: 1) Theme-based courses are organized as a series of modules in which the language instructors teach both subject matter and language; 2) Sheltered instruction is specially designed subject matter teaching given to a group of second language learners by a content specialist; and 3) Adjunct instruction requires that students be enrolled concurrently in a language course and a content course that are linked through collaboration amongst the two teachers. These three models have become almost commonplace wherever English as a second language and English as a foreign language are taught.

I decided that theme-based language instruction was most appropriate for the Chinese students in my course (Technical Terms of Business English). As stated before, this course was language based and had a syllabus organized around the themes of management, marketing, accounting, and tourism. Each theme provided organized topics for 3 weeks of integrated classroom work. The topics were introduced through reading, vocabulary, guided discussions, audio and video materials, listening comprehension, and finally written assignments integrating information from several different sources. Most of the materials used were teacher-generated.

Teaching method and strategies used by CB teachers

Due to the Chinese students not being able to speak either Thai or Chinese for classroom communication with a Thai teacher, the communication in the classroom was only English. I tried to follow the model that a teacher should have more experience in teaching by using various kinds of teaching techniques to help learners understand. Sometimes when learners do not seem to understand the content, the teacher needs to check their understanding by asking questions. If they can not follow the lessons, the teacher has to find ways to help the learners, such as simplifying, paraphrasing or giving examples. Moreover, it is necessary for the teacher to fully understand the material in order to handle a successful CBI class. As I have mentioned before, I used strategies like asking questions, simplifying, paraphrasing and giving examples while teaching the subject content. It was a slow class at the beginning because the strategies mentioned before meant learners needed more time to understand the lesson.

In addition I tried to apply some suitable and interesting teaching aids that could help them feel excited during the lesson. Some of the visual aids I used were actual texts from newspapers, pictures from magazines or the internet, charts, tourist brochures, travel guides, and TV commercials. These materials often aided the



learners in understanding quicker than if I merely provided spoken explanations. Moreover content-based teachers can implement teaching methods and strategies used in the communicative or experiential approach in their classrooms. In particular, they can promote realistic communicative tasks and extensively use authentic resources in the target language. At the intermediate or secondary levels, they may use resources such as newspapers and catalogues, radio and television programs, charts, timetables and schedules, recipes and restaurant menus, plans, maps and historical documents, novels, plays and poems, tourist brochures and travel guides, CDs and videos, advertisements, TV commercials and video-clips, the internet, and finally books and dictionaries. At all levels, they can rely on brainstorming, discussions, demonstrations, explanations, formal lessons, role playing and simulations. With so many authentic resources available in the target language, teacher must choose the appropriate ones that relate to the learning content and the students' abilities.

And further beyond the realistic communicative tasks and authentic resources that have been mentioned already, the CB teachers can also use well-known teaching techniques; such as cooperative learning and project-based learning. My students tended to favour small group or paired learning activities and to take part in projects such as surveys and searches, interviews, presentations, and reports.

CB teachers also must realise the importance of developing the four language skills (listening, talking, reading and writing). They must incorporate specific activities designed to develop listening and reading skills as well as oral and written production skills (VCE Study Guide, 1999). The students will achieve the learning objectives if the teacher's lesson plans can include the four language skills (listening, talking, reading and writing) and also contain a clear learning outcome. (adapted from <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/francais/frcore/sec/inst2.html#teach>)

Teacher's tips

The primary role of the content-based teacher in a communicative or experiential language class is to establish conditions and develop activities so that students will be able to practise the language in a meaningful context. It is one of the teacher's greatest responsibilities to foster a student's positive attitude toward second language learning.

The teacher should assume his or her role as facilitator, resource provider and language model within the second-language classroom. In this case the teacher should be the person who can use both the target language and classroom communication skills, and also be well versed in the subject content. When developing lessons, the teacher must predict the possible needs of the students and have communicative language activities readily available to meet those needs. The activities should be designed so that the students experience a high degree of success. Teachers will also experience greater success with the activities if they are planned around the students' interests and take into account subjects of which they have some knowledge.

The teacher is also instrumental in creating a positive and supportive learning environment within the class. Students who feel safe and secure are much more willing to practise a second or foreign language. A healthy classroom climate promotes risk-taking and allows the students to experiment. Positive experiences in the classroom lead to an excellent attitude toward language and culture. (<http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/francais/frcore/middle/approaches.html>, 1995)

The teacher should prepare a target language course (such as an English course) for students who are not good or not familiar with target language communication before starting the CBI course. In addition, an English proficiency test should be used to screen the students' abilities before attending the CBI program. Language-based courses, according to Swaffar, assume that language must be mastered before content can be understood, whereas content-based courses assume the reverse.

The teacher should know the students' language ability before choosing the suitable course text. The learners will learn well when the teacher prepares the comprehensible input texts. Using authentic texts is a good idea for teaching because real texts are the primary source for learning. According to Krashen (1982), in content-based instruction, students can acquire the content area of the subject matter with comprehensible input, and simultaneously increase their language skills. To achieve the goal of language skills improvement, Krashen states that the focus of teaching is on the authentic and meaningful input, not on the grammatical form. If the teacher tries to simplify the texts, the teacher must be a content expert and have a perfect use of the target language. It is risky for students if the teacher puts his own attitudes and opinions in the texts.

Class activities

The focus of the class activities should be to elicit knowledge of content, to acquire thinking skills, and to develop English language abilities. The course text containing business topics should consider the students' English abilities, the students' benefits, as well as the background knowledge and interests of the students. Students will learn and get significant input by reading. Because of this, a KWL method (Know, Want to know, and Learned) was chosen for the target group. KWL method is intended to be an exercise for a study group or class that guides learners in reading and understanding a text. Learners will develop the skills needed to work alone, but group discussions are often more helpful. The class activities were organized by using KWL method, which provides three stages for implementing activities. The three steps are presented in the following table.

Presentation	Practice	Production
What we <u>know</u>	What we <u>want</u> to know	What we have <u>learned</u>

- **Presentation:**

- Building background knowledge before reading, teachers can ask students general questions related to the content in order to have a schematic understanding and to arouse learning motivation.
- Building vocabulary, technical terms and expressions

- **Practice:**

- CBI incorporates several successful teaching approaches such as cooperative learning, experiential learning, whole language, learning strategy uses, etc. It relies on the teaching methodologies of second language instruction as well as those from other content-areas. (Grabe & Stoller, 1997).
- Teaching strategies should be applied, such as asking questions, simplifying, paraphrasing and giving examples while teaching contents. Moreover the target students feel more secure when they work in pairs or groups. Also, when the students who understand the material assist the students who do not yet fully understand, both groups of students improve comprehension. **The leader of the group would share the responsibilities for each to run the jobs for a good outcome (this last sentence isn't really needed).**



- **Production:**

- Group or individual presentations
- Reflection: written comprehension essays after each lesson
- Portfolio

The feedback from the teacher after the students' presentation, reflection, portfolio or other assignments are very important for building improvement.

How can theme based CBI be assessed?

A theme based CBI course emphasize both content and language skills. Student progress can then be assessed during the class time. Continuous assessment is effective. Daily quizzes can be used to check that content information is being understood by the students and that they remember important vocabulary. Quizzes should be done individually in order to know each student's language and content knowledge ability. Pair or group quizzes do not inform the teacher of which students understand and which ones still need assistance. 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 lesson content 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. The writing feedback may be suggested after every class period or lesson. From written assignments, the teacher can evaluate the students' understanding of the lesson most recently taught. Also it is a good self-evaluation for the teacher. This technique can help the teacher decide what he or she should do for the next period.

When teaching in the classroom, an instructor should monitor the learners' linguistic development. When the teacher feels that learners cannot catch up with their studies, a teaching technique such as asking questions (Comprehension Check) about the previous taught content is a good mechanism for checking the students' understanding. Some students can learn and respond to the questions, while some cannot. If there is wide spread confusion, the teacher should review the more difficult content by illustrating concepts, using reviewing activities, or administering tests.(adapted from Stephen Davies, Content-Based Instruction in EFL Contexts, from <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Davies-CBI.html>, 2003)

Conclusion

Theme based CBI is an effective method which combines language and content learning (Technical Terms of Business English). By knowing the students' English proficiency, I could prepare comprehensible input so that most of the students could pass the tests and deliver successful presentations. Also I applied some teaching strategies to help low level learners to study more effectively. Some teaching approaches such as cooperative learning and experiential learning provide different learning environments that might draw the students' attention. Theme based CBI works well in EFL contexts, and I believe its use will increase as teachers continue to design new syllabi in response to students' needs and interests. As I mentioned in the beginning, I believe that learner motivation increases when students learn about specific content rather than just study the mechanics and terms of a language. Content-based Instruction has proven successful in developing academic competence in LEP students because such programs concentrate on the simultaneous development of content-area and ESL proficiency. What can be better than seeing our students gain academic knowledge and learn a language at the same time?

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