

Research into the Integration of Content-Based Instruction into the ESP Classroom

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Abstract

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) implies combining language learning and content of subject matter. Content provides cognitive and motivational basis for language learning by making it captivating and interesting to learners.

Moreover, CBI allows the integration of all language skills within subject matter by making it engaging for learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

This paper addresses various forms of CBI and a desirable sequence of their application. Learners' responses to acquiring various language skills through CBI and self-assessment of language skills are compared with learning outcome.

Introduction

A foreign language is most successfully acquired when learners are engaged in its meaningful use. Language learning and content of subject matter could be brought together within the Content-Based Instruction (CBI). The integration of language and content involves the incorporation of content material into language classes. CBI is sometimes referred to as 'language across the curriculum', and has become increasingly popular as a means of developing linguistic ability. Content can provide a motivational and cognitive basis for language learning since it is interesting and of some value to the learner (Brewster, 1999:84). CBI combines integrated teaching of all language skills and subject matter, which makes it an appealing approach to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, as at higher levels language can be perfected through subject contents.

This paper aims at exploring various forms of CBI and integrating the relevant content into the ESP classroom within a slightly different approach, i.e. without involving subject teachers. CBI can be implemented by teaching English through subject content. Employing learners' knowledge of subject, using task-based learning and holistic approach to language instruction through up-dated authentic materials and involving learners in the meaningful usage of language allows learners to develop their linguistic ability in the target language. Learners' responses and self-assessment of successful / unsuccessful experience in CBI activities are being presented and discussed.

Background Research

It is known that although learners can participate in memorized conversations easily and effortlessly, hardly any can produce at length fluent variations from the basic material, and none could talk on unrehearsed topics without hesitation (Rivers, 1992: 41). This inability to convey professional information without preparation and at ease is a classic example of a non-native speaker, as if there is a barrier between the areas of vocational knowledge and language skills in people's brain. A vast majority of non-native speakers of English complain of the 'shortage of words' and inability to 'translate' impromptu what they wish to convey. Thereby, the English language practitioners have been preoccupied with designing techniques and building up linguistic links between subject matter and language use by non-native speakers of English.

There are four major empirical research findings that emphasize the benefits of CBI (Rivers, 1992: 41):

- 1) thematically organized materials are easier to learn and remember; 2) coherent and meaningful information is deeper and better processed; 3) common outcome of CBI is a link between learner motivation and interest; 4) developing expertise in a topic through a sequence of complex tasks.

The advantages of CBI are numerous, and the most important are: to make learning a language more interesting and motivating, to develop learners' knowledge of the world and valuable study skills such as note-taking, summarizing and finding key information in available materials (Peachey, 2003). The potential problems are related to CBI not being explicitly focused on language learning. This might lead to overuse of students' native language and a direct copying of information from materials without evaluating its reliability.

Adoption of CBI allows language educators to incorporate language functions, skills, vocabulary, grammar into language classes. CBI is often linked with project work, which involves multi-skill activities focusing on a theme of interest rather than specific language tasks (Haines, 1989: 7). It is emphasized that different types of projects have the same common features - students' interaction, collaboration, involvement, and responsibility. Project work implies cooperative learning and task-based activities, and it is viewed as "an approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages and abilities of students" (Haines, 1989: 8).

The ten-step sequence of activities for implementing project work in an ESP classroom was described in detail by F. L. Stoller (1997: 2), who gives clear structure to project work and guides teachers and students in developing projects that facilitate content learning and provide opportunities for explicit language instruction.

CBI can also be implemented through using a Task-Based Learning (TBL), which was advocated by Jane Willis (1996: 7). TBL is based on sound theoretical foundations and takes account of the need for authentic communication. TBL is a goal-oriented activity with a clear purpose. Tasks are used as the central component of a three-part framework consisting of 'pre-task phase', 'task-cycle' and 'language focus'. Learners get exposure at the first stage, and opportunity to use language at the second stage. Motivation is provided by the need to achieve the task's objectives. The final stage includes language focus which benefits developing learners' accuracy in language use through consciousness-raising processes. The main advantage of TBL is that language is used for a genuine purpose of communication.

Research Techniques

All in all, there were 220 participants in this investigation: two streams of the first and second-year students, who had 100 hours and 200 hours of ESP instruction, respectively. Data for the study were collected over four years period. The employed methods included administering self-assessment questionnaires, interviewing learners and testing their performance.

Research into CBI incorporation

Traditionally ESP syllabus comprises a number of professional themes and aims at developing students' language skills within the subject contents with emphasis on the communicative language use. Therefore, CBI does not look like an innovative way of teaching and learning at tertiary level. Syllabi are usually rather pre-determined and far from being flexible, and the number of specific themes are listed for each semester. In our settings, the question of practicality of applying project work at the beginning of ESP course poses some doubts, basically because learners are not ready to produce reasonable work at this stage.

At the beginning of the ESP course, approximately 30% of first-year students (in a sample of 220) responded negatively to communicative activities, probably because they were not used to them in their earlier studies of language. Learners' negative attitudes toward work in pairs or small groups underwent a change after students became aware of the advantages of communicative activities. Students admitted being tense with fear of speaking in front of peers. Communicative approach and rehearsal (try-out) of brief talks in pairs played positive part in changing students' attitudes.

Another stereotype that students had been used to at school that learning was exam- or test-oriented is hard to tackle. Learners usually expect to be graded for any activity they perform. The idea of learning for the sake of language knowledge and its prospective usage and not for the sake of passing an exam seemed to majority of learners unthinkable.

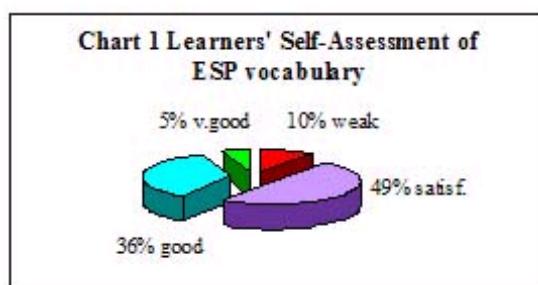
These findings posed serious problems in implementing subject-oriented approach to learning language. It was essential to make decisions how to encourage teacher-learners' collaboration. Eventually, negotiating (with learners) a selection of authentic materials and appropriate classroom activities made a great change to learning environment and relationships within the classes. Challenge of CBI incorporation methods proved beneficial in fostering learner autonomy.

Research into the Acquisition of Vocabulary

Statistics on learners' attitudes towards their evaluation of success (or failure) in learning has been obtained by administering self-assessment questionnaires.

Learners' self-assessment of ESP vocabulary is depicted in the pie chart 1. It can be seen that almost half of respondents admit having satisfactory knowledge of legal terminology. A small minority is either very good or weak at production of ESP vocabulary, and slightly over the third think their knowledge is good. The findings are quite significant - they demonstrate that majority of learners are quite realistic about their acquired vocabulary.

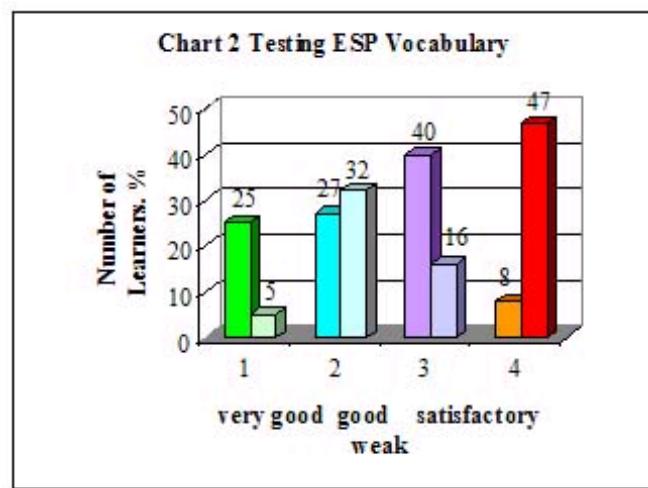
Interestingly, learners' self-assessment of vocabulary usually concerns their ability to recognize the terminology but not the ability to recall it. In other words, self-assessment data cover students' opinions on acquisition of passive vocabulary. For production purposes, i.e. speaking and writing, knowledge of active vocabulary is essential. Actual acquisition of vocabulary can be revealed through its testing. Testing learners' ability to recall vocabulary by translating legal terms (from English into their native language, and from the native language into English) has shown interesting data, which are presented in bar chart 2.



First columns in chart 2 represent students' ability to translate legal vocabulary from the L2 into the L1, and the second columns - from the L1 into the L2.

Predictably, recognition of vocabulary in the L2 is easy for majority of students - 52% of learners are either very good or good at translation, and slightly fewer than half (48%) have either satisfactory or weak knowledge.

It is obvious that learners find it hard to recall legal terms in a foreign language: weak - 47%, and satisfactory - 16%. Only 5% are very good, and 32% are good at producing appropriate ESP vocabulary.

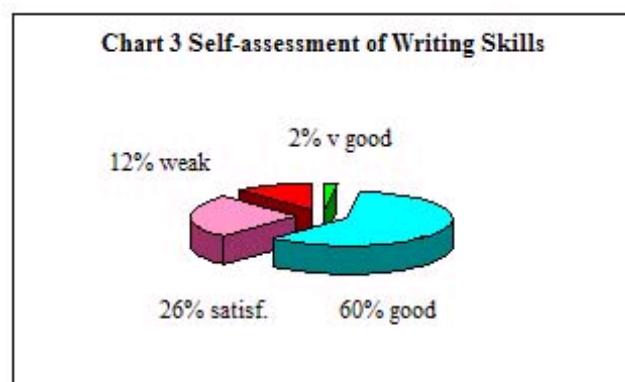


Therefore, the first logical step toward learning English through the subject matter is to deal with the acquisition of professional vocabulary. Learning vocabulary is thought to be more effective if it is learnt from the context. Content-related vocabulary is easier to memorize and retain. Such learning implies doing a vast amount of reading. Learners are expected to read a text on specific subject and pick up professional terms. Unfortunately, a vast majority of students anticipated getting lists of vocabulary items and were frustrated and disappointed not to get any. Thereby, the first important task was to train learners to make up their own lists from the reading materials. Ways of memorizing vocabulary differ for learners with different learning styles that remain fixed with the lapse of time.

The common techniques of drawing 'spider-grams' or 'mind-mapping' proved beneficial to majority of learners, who reported that context provided a logical way of building up relevant terms on specific themes. Some students preferred other techniques, e.g. writing their own cards with word definitions and examples of their usage. But, as the saying goes 'old habits die hard', some learners persisted in the traditional school method of making at random lists of English words and their translation into mother tongue.

Research into the Skill of Summary Writing

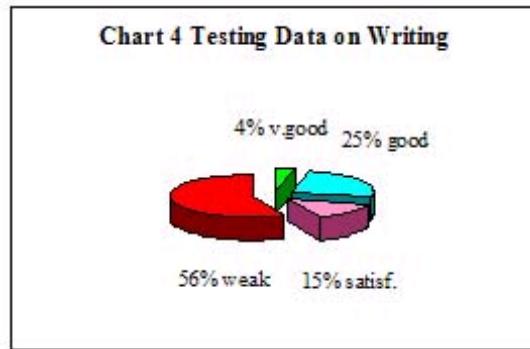
Learners' self-assessment of writing skills is shown in chart 3.



Only 2% of learners assess their writing skill as very good, and, surprisingly, 60% are sure of

being good at writing. 12% admit being weak, and the fourth think their writing skill is satisfactory. The findings are quite unexpected and startling. Learners seem to be unaware that writing involves ability to express oneself freely by employing adequate vocabulary and avoiding grammar errors.

Logically, the testing data on writing present a completely different picture and are depicted in the chart 4. Over half of learners (56%) demonstrate weak performance in writing, and 15% - satisfactory. A quarter of students are good, and only 4% are very good at writing. The data prove that learners are far from being realistic about their writing skills.



Integrating CBI into writing activities has a great potential for improving students' writing skills. One of the ways of doing it is through writing summaries of professional texts. The skills of summarizing are interrelated with the skills of reading, thus both these skills have to be developed simultaneously. The methodology of developing skills of writing summaries that we employed in the ESP classroom is described in detail elsewhere (Kavaliauskiene & Januleviciene, 2001: 26). Reflecting on ways of helping learners to improve their writing, an idea of introducing visual aids into summary analysis proved beneficial. In the early stages of teaching skill of summarizing, an oral analysis of pairs' produced summary was explored. However it was hard for students to remember the whole passage after having listened to it because of their short span of a short-term memory. Thus such a discussion could not have been effective. An innovative approach to learners' reflection on their summaries was introduced. Each pair of learners wrote their summary on a transparency. Analysis of each summary was carried out as the whole class activity by displaying transparency on the screen by means of an overhead projector. Such a procedure allows students to discuss all the points of criteria, involves all other pairs and eventually helps improve skills of summarizing. The points in favor of such an approach are: 1) learners are not aware whose written work is being discussed and are not worried about losing face; 2) teachers' load of correcting written work at home is reduced; 3) teachers' interference in the classroom is minimal - learners seek to perfect the written work themselves on the spot. The major drawback of collaborative and interactive analysis is the prolonged consumption of time. Nevertheless, learning writing through writing and learning from one's mistakes while discussing them with others, not just pointing them out, seems to be a better way to proficiency than teacher's correction of individual summaries.

Another activity for fostering reading and writing skills through the subject matter was a complex of intertwined activities of creative writing using a vocabulary bank, followed by reading an authentic material that contained the same vocabulary items that were given for creative writing and, finally, summarizing an authentic text. This complex of activities was described in our previous paper (Januleviciene & Kavaliauskiene, 2001: 61).

Research into Making Presentations

Managing presentations has always been considered as an art which has a scientific background of using 'a must' rules of getting a meaning across. Managing presentations involves such preliminaries as winning attention, choosing a layout, visuals, keeping contact with audience, delivery, etc. Gaining insights into presentations, however, does not ensure the successful outcome (Owen, 2001).

Learners' attitude to making presentations was overwhelmingly positive - 94% think that ability to make presentations is important +essential (Kaval iauskiene, 2003).

In advance prepared oral presentation seems to be a good way of getting used to speaking in front of other people. Having brainstormed students' attitudes to oral presentations, we reached an agreement that it made sense to practice presentations because learners will have to perform this kind of activity in future.

However, learners need to learn giving short talks before they manage presentations. Teaching techniques of impromptu speaking has been described in (Kaval iauskiene, 2004, in press).

Features of a good presentation and its criteria should be outlined before students make first attempts at presentations. However, learners became aware of which features make presentations successful and are of the greatest importance only after they have practiced and self-assessed their own and peers' presentations. We had to train students on developing right strategies for successful presentations, e.g. watching and discussing some video clips (Comfort, 1995) on how to succeed and what might lead to failure.

An evaluation checklist was compiled together with students. It includes the following items: clear objectives of the talk, introduction of the outline, content of presentation (i.e. description of a problem, review of available data, methods and findings, conclusions), organization of the presentation, use of visual aids, fluency and clarity of the talk, involvement of audience, and conclusions (if planned objectives were met).

In spite of thorough preparation, the first presentations had been a great disappointment - students read the notes they had prepared at home either from their seats or standing in front of the class. As the training continued, learners became more competent and self-confident, and general performance kept improving: students stopped reading from the notes, remembered to keep an eye-contact with audience and tried to involve listeners in various ways. The only weakness was students' reluctance to use visual aids. An idea of preparing projects as the whole class activity originated and was gradually implemented as a follow-up stage.

Research into Taking Part in Projects

Project work was introduced into syllabus as a logical step towards fostering learners' language skills. The most important advantage of project work is that projects comprise integration of all language skills through communicative approach: translation from mother tongue into English (using knowledge of subject matter), reading (in order to collect extra information), writing (note-taking), speaking (team/class discussion), listening (to other learners).

There are other important advantages of project work like working in a team, developing students' creativity, building confidence, increasing motivation, and fostering communicative skills - negotiating, agreeing, disagreeing, making compromises. In spite of all these advantages, only 47% of students found projects useful (Kaval iauskiene, 2003).

Naturally, project work was considered as a novelty, and novelties were not immediately and overwhelmingly accepted by all learners. There were a few students who preferred to work individually and were reluctant to take part in projects and cooperate with peers. Learning styles and strategies vary for each student, and teachers have to take them into consideration.

For obvious reasons, the most valuable part for improving learning remains the stage of self-evaluation since learners can analyze and compare their own activities with those of other students. Self-assessment was conducted by learners and helped them to reflect on difficulties they faced and actual performance.

The evaluation criteria were worked out together with students and included assessment in the areas of: 1) confidence and fluency of individual speakers, 2) awareness of body language, 3) usage of

appropriate ESP vocabulary & register, 4) participation in a team work.

Statistically, students' performance in projects has been improving steadily, and by the end of ESP course almost 50% of learners have been awarded good and very good grades. 30% of students managed to speak without prompts with some occasional grammar errors occurring in their speech. The rest 20% relied on their notes a lot lacking confidence and accuracy.

Conclusions

ESP is best acquired through the subject matter basically due to learners' genuine interest in it. Subject matters can be introduced by English language teachers throughout English classes by employing vocational materials.

Content-based instruction comprises steps of vocabulary acquisition, oral and written summarizing, making oral presentations and participating in project preparation and delivery. All these stages employ learners' professional knowledge and prompt them to activate it in a foreign language. Being content-related, the described areas of language learning allow learners to develop competence in the ESP through a sequence of thematically organized tasks.

Our research has shown that on the whole learning outcome through CBI has been successful and deserves being employed in ESP classroom.

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