

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.

What Types of Content Based Instruction Are There?

The Sheltered Model

Sheltered and adjunct CBI usually occurs at universities in English L1 contexts. The goal of teachers using sheltered and adjunct CBI is to enable their ESL students to study the same content material as regular English L1 students. Sheltered CBI is called "sheltered" because learners are given special assistance to help them understand regular classes. Two teachers can work together to give instruction in a specific subject. One of the teachers is a content specialist and the other an ESL specialist. They may teach the class together or the class time may be divided between the two of them. For example, the content specialist will give a short lecture and then the English teacher will check that the students have understood the important words by reviewing them later. This kind of team teaching requires teachers to work closely together to plan and evaluate classes. It has been used successfully at the bilingual University of Ottawa, where classes are taught in English and French, (Briton, 1989).

The Adjunct Model

Adjunct classes are usually taught by ESL teachers. The aim of these classes is to prepare students for "mainstream" classes where they will join English L1 learners. Adjunct classes may resemble EPA or ESP classes where emphasis is placed on acquiring specific target vocabulary; they may also feature study skills sessions to familiarize the students with listening, note taking and skimming and scanning texts. Some adjunct classes are taught during the summer months before regular college classes begin, while others run concurrently with regular lessons.

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.

How Does Theme Based CBI Differ from Sheltered and Adjunct Models?

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 psychology class that I team taught with a psychologist:

- Unit 1 Introduction to psychology
- Unit 2 Types of learning
- Unit 3 Advertising and psychological techniques
- Unit 4 Counseling
- Unit 5 Psychological illnesses
- Unit 6 Project work

Each unit took from two to three weeks to complete. The students had two classes per week and each class lasted for two and a half hours. The syllabus that we used is clearly different from a conventional Introduction to Psychology class. Our aim was to allow the students to explore various aspects of psychology rather than attempting to give them a thorough grounding in a subject which, we believed, would have been too difficult for them to understand at this stage. In fact one of the strengths of theme based CBI is its flexibility; teachers can create units with specific learner needs in mind. For example, Unit 3 began with some textbook readings followed by questions and written work. After this the students were given some advertisements to analyze and also brought in their own examples for use in group discussions. Finally, for a small group project, they designed their own advertisements and then presented their work to the other class members with a rationale for why they had chosen their product and who the target customers would be. Among the products they designed were a genetically engineered cake tree and a time vision camera.

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.

Readability

The Flesch-Kincaid test is one method of measuring the readability of writing. Difficulty is assessed by analyzing sentence length and the number of syllables per word. Put simply, short sentences containing words with few syllables are considered to be the easiest to read. The Flesch-Kincaid test can also be used to assess the difficulty of texts for EFL students. For students with scores below TOEFL 500, Flesch - Kincaid scores in the range 5.0- 8.0 are appropriate. (By way of comparison this paper has a Flesch-Kincaid rating of 11.1). However, far more detailed research needs to be done in the area of assessing student responses to the readability of adapted materials. For example, the Flesch-Kincaid test assumes that passive constructions are more difficult for students to understand than active ones; however my own preliminary investigations have shown that removing passive verbs and replacing them with active ones does **not** necessarily make the students feel that the text is any easier to read.

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 I believe its use will increase as teachers continue to design new syllabi in response to student needs and interests. As I said at the beginning, I believe that 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?

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