
Content-based Instruction: A Strategy to Develop Language Skills to Students

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ABSTRACT

Students coming from vernacular background face problems when they have to use the target language. Various activities are thought of related to the subject being taught and students are geared to stimulate to think and learn through the use of the target language. Content-based instruction (CBI) has led to the integrated teaching of the four language skills. For example, it employs authentic reading materials which require students not only to understand information but to interpret and evaluate it as well. It provides a platform where students can respond orally to reading and lecture materials. It recognises that academic writing follows from listening and reading, and thus requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing. Thus CBI has helped students to get exposed to study skills and learn a variety of language skills which prepare them for the range of academic tasks that they will encounter.

INTRODUCTION:

Krahnke (1987) defines content-based instruction (CBI) as:

The teaching of content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct explicit effort to teach language itself separately from the content taught. (p.65)

As a clarification to this definition Richard and Rodgers (2001), add that, CBI refers to an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organised around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus. (p.204)

To have a better insight into the content-based instruction, one should have knowledge of the models that are present in CBI. These models are as follows:

1. Theme-based Model:

In this model selected topics or theme provide the content for students to learn (Brinton et al, 1989). Based on these topics and themes, language teachers extract language activities and engage students in language practice and content learning simultaneously. As an example, under the supervision of language teacher students work on the topic 'picnic', and by doing certain activities, they get familiar with the concept of picnic and its related registers and jargon.

2. Immersion Model:

This model can be considered as the prototypical content based approach. Snow (2001) explains that "in the total immersion model, English-speaking elementary school students receive the majority of their schooling through the medium of their second language" (p. 305).

3. Adjunct Model:

Richard and Rodgers (2001) explained adjunct model instruction as:

In this model, students are enrolled in two linked courses, one a content course and one a language course, with both courses sharing the same content based complementing each other in terms of mutually coordinated assignment. Such a program requires a large amount of coordination to ensure that the two curricula are interlocking and this may require modification of both courses (pp 216-27).

In this model teacher tries to engage students in various activities related to the four language skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing), for enhancing student's knowledge, literacy, oral development, cultural understanding and thinking skills. For achieving this goal, Krashan (1985) supports using extended text such as novel and short story for promoting literacy development and getting students familiar with literary style.

4. Sheltered Model:

This model is based on the Canadian model of immersion education. Larsen –Freeman (2000) defined sheltered model as a type of CBI model in which “both the native speaker and non-native speaker of a particular language follow a regular academic curriculum” (p.142).

CBI is a useful approach in language and subject matter teaching. Richard and Rodgers (2001) explain some of the assumptions and learning theories that existed and based on which CBI came into existence. These assumptions and theories are as follows:

1. Students learn a second language in a better way when they make use of language as a means of acquiring something else rather than an end in itself.
2. Some disciplines such as geography, psychology and literature due to their unique features lend themselves better to content –based instruction.
3. Students learn best when instruction is related to their specific needs and CBI using Larsen-Freeman (2000) terms as a part of the movement “language across curriculum” (p.137) does so.

REASONS TO USE LITERATURE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM:

There are debates regarding the use of literature in the language classes, in various books and by lot of renowned applied linguists and literary personalities. McKay (1986) states some of the undeniable benefits of using literature in language classroom. She believes that literature in language classroom makes L2 learners motivated enough to read extensively in English and this amount of reading leads to cultural knowledge and sensitivity and boosts learners' reading skills. Langer (1997) states, "because it taps what the learners know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy" (p. 607). Moreover according to Langer, literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. Literature can open " horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 607).

Littlewood (1986) specifies four perspectives for literature and discusses these perspectives' use in language teaching context. According to him, "at the simplest level literature is not

qualitatively different from any other linguistic performance" he adds that "literature provides instances of language structure in use, which can form the basis for instruction and practice in language skills, especially accompanied by a varying amount of grammatical analysis and explanation" (pp. 178-179). Littlewood (1986) explains the second perspective in this way that the perspective comes into play when students who have passed the initial stages of learning and are at later stages in which they become capable of sensitivity to stylistic variations. Therefore, literature can be very beneficial in the sense that it becomes a vehicle for teaching the differences between the varieties and it can be claimed that through the use of literature students become familiar with different styles of writing and features of different genres. Littlewood (1986) continues with the explaining of the third perspective and its benefits in ESL classes. He states that " at the third level literature is the expression of the superficial subject matter as it relates events or describes scenes: the plot of a drama or the story of a novel" (p.178).

A major problem in language teaching classes is the lack of authentic situation for language teaching. Littlewood (1986) mentions three ways of compensating for the absence of real events and authentic material in language classroom and literature is one of them whose benefits here is related to this third perspective. Littlewood (1986) adds and explains the fourth perspective "as a level at which literature is a symbolization of the author's vision of these events and his or her worldview" (p.178). It is at this level in which transition from receptive skills to productive skills intensifies (i.e.) at this level literature might provide a basis for generalizing and theorizing in language classroom.

Other linguists have also mentioned the benefits of literature in general and in language classroom. Among them Fitzgerald (1993) states, literature can be a vehicle for improving students' overall language skills. It can "expose students to a wide variety of styles and genres" (p. 643). It is in literature that "the resources of the language are most fully and skilfully used" (Sage, 1987, p.6). As we know that the language of literature's is a sophisticated one, and the most superior form of language is employed in different literary works and nobody is capable of versifying a piece of poetry in a second language unless s/he has acquired a language fully. Therefore, it is sensible to attempt to make students become familiar with this sophisticated form of language at later stages of language learning. In teaching language components such as vocabulary, idioms and proverbs, literature surprisingly has a role. An example clarifies such a claim fully. Many idioms and proverbs which exist in a language originate in the literature of that language, and in teaching those idioms etymology we'd better go through and have a glance at the literary work based on which the idioms came into existence. For instance, we have the idiom "Achilles heel" in English which is based on an old literary work. Based on all these comments and quotations concerning the benefits and uses of literature in ESL/EFL classrooms, literature's significant roles in language classroom become undoubtedly obvious. However, before making use of literature in language classroom, one important thing needs to be taken into consideration.

Selecting a suitable and interesting literary text for language classroom is of significant value. Most texts are obsolete and useless for language teaching context unless we have certain goals in mind such as teaching archaic words and structures. Some literary texts don't arouse students' interest and motivation and even are in complete contrast with students' values and culture. Use of such texts should be prohibited because it leads to nothing and sometimes become counterproductive. Based on all the above-mentioned information regarding content-based

instruction and the benefits of literature, it is time to discuss the benefits of content-based instruction and literature teaching.

USE OF LITERATURE IN CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

Brinton et al. (1989) made a list of several benefits of collaborating CBI and literature. For example, knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, paragraph, structure, interactive communication skills, and types and styles of writing can be acquired through the collaboration of CBI and literature. To repeat the same benefits again, Abulhaija (1987) further supports that language and literature are inseparable, for each has something important to offer in the development of a well-rounded student. Literature teaches idiomatic language and cultural contexts; it better correctness in speech and writing, encourages extensive reading, boosts reading and comprehension skills. Erkaya (2005) states that by integrating literature in the curricula, students can acquire and learn the four skills more easily and effectively because of the literary, cultural, higher order thinking, and motivational benefits.

Shang (2006) included the following objectives for a content-based instruction program in the EFL literature curriculum.

- Build on students' educational background and personal experiences based on the topic of the literature
- Help students comprehend the meaning that the author tries to convey in order to enhance their reading ability
- Provide the opportunities for peer cooperative learning
- Enhance students' critical thinking and judgmental abilities
- Develop students' aural/oral fluency by asking questions and sharing their feedback
- Develop students' writing ability by writing an essay or comments related to the topic of the literature (pp. 4-5).

Thus, through the above mentioned use of literature in CBI one can derive at a point that literature is needed to teach the language skills to students in a better and an interesting manner.

ACTIVITIES THROUGH LITERATURE:

In a CBI model based on English literature, the classroom activities primarily revolve around English literature content and secondarily deal with developing language skills. These multifunctional activities are related to eliciting knowledge of content, acquisition of thinking skills, and development of English language abilities. A novel or short stories can be a suitable source based on which these multifunctional activities can be designed.

Before mentioning some of these activities it should be born in mind that the novel or short story selected as the source of activities should be an interesting modern type of literary work and students should be familiar with it culturally. A passage from "The Thief" by Ruskin Bond taken from the book *Fantasy: A collection of short stories* is given below and a set of activities consistent with CBI model for upper-intermediate students are provided.

"I had been working for Arun for nearly a fortnight, and apart from the shopping, hadn't done much to exploit him. I had every opportunity for doing so. I had a key to the front door, which meant I had access to the room whenever Arun was out. He was the most trusting person I had ever met. And that was why I couldn't make up my mind to rob him.

It's easy to rob a greedy man, because he deserves to be robbed; it's easy to rob a rich man, because he can afford to be robbed, but it's difficult to rob a poor man, even one who really doesn't care if he is robbed. A rich man or a greedy man or a careful man wouldn't keep his money under a pillow or a mattress, he'd lock it up in a safe place. Arun had put his money where it would be child's play for me to remove it without his knowledge.

It's time I did some real work, I told myself; I am getting out of practice...If I don't take the money, he'll only waste it on his friends...He doesn't even pay me...

Arun was asleep. Moonlight came in from the veranda and fell across the bed. I sat up on the floor, my blanket wrapped around me, considering the situation. There was quite a lot of money in that ward, and if I took it I would have to leave the town- I might make the 10:30 express to Amritsar..."

ACTIVITIES & GUIDELINES FOR THE STUDENTS:

1. Textual questions:

Before reading the short story, students were asked certain questions such as

- Did you ever see a thief?
- Did you ever get pick pocketed?
- What happens when a thief is caught stealing?
- Why do you think a person steal?

This is a brain-storming session where students are not directly stated about the passage or the short story they have to read and understand. This session helps students to guess what is to come next.

2. Motivating activities:

Before reading the story, students were made to watch a short movie or video clip concerning the thieves. Short video clipping from the movies 'Alibaba and the forty thieves', 'Mackenna's Gold' etc. were played and as this motivates learners to learn the target language in an interesting manner.

3. Teaching vocabularies:

Various kinds of vocabulary activities were made, to make students understand the story better and also to have a better knowledge of the different words and their usages. For e.g.

- a. Students were asked to find the words from the passage whose meaning are given below.
- b. They need to explain the expressions that are provided.

4. Post reading activities to check students' critical thinking:

After reading the short story, students should be engaged in discussing the meanings conveyed by the author; they should extract the themes, motif, and symbols of the story and relate them to their own life. Through the interactive group discussion, students can develop their language fluency and critical thinking abilities. For example, based on the above-mentioned passage, they could talk about the word "robbed" and what it represents for the main protagonist of the story. The danger of fear and centrality of personal legends and the major theme of the story could also be discussed upon. The students could also be given some writing activities in the form of compositions concerning the theme.

5. Group learning activities:

Students can form some groups with each member taking a role in an activity related to the story. For example; students can come up with a different ending for the story in their groups and work together and write a different ending paragraph for the story. Having finished the writing assignment, they try to persuade the other groups that their choice for the end of the story is the best choice.

6. Speaking activities:

Students should do an internet search about the author of the story and the next session they should give a presentation about his or her biography and style of writing and the different books that the author has written.

THE POST-LESSON EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT:

As has been discussed earlier, that, in the adjunct model the students need to attend two classes, therefore in the content class they are taught different issues regarding the subject matter and in language class they become familiar with content related language. The language trainer in this model helps students do content assignments.

Both of these classes have pre-specified outcomes which are expressed from the students at the end of the courses. Therefore, a variety of instruments to evaluate students' content and language learning are required. For instance, whereas written multiple choices, True or False, or essay questions could be employed to gauge students' reading comprehension ability, open-ended questions format like writing an essay about the content taught during the term can be used to assess both writing skills and subject matter learning. Shang (2006) proposes different kinds of games such as "Jeopardy" through which students' aural/oral ability as well as vocabulary and reading comprehension can be assessed. All these question types should be designed in a way that address students' understanding of the content of the short story or other literary works which were taught.

A Practical Example:

The activities mentioned above were carried out in the classroom consisting of 30 members and the time duration of each class is 1 hour. The feedback obtained after the class was quite promising. The participants were engineering students of second year and the only literary piece they get for their syllabus is the book named '*Fantasy: a collection of short stories*'. The

questions that come generally from this book during the examination are comprehension types or broad answer types.

As the engineering students are not very keen in studying the literary pieces as their subject, therefore the activities that were discussed earlier are done in the classes to make the learners get interested in the subject. The class time was divided into two sections like two classes of adjunct model. The first 30 minutes was devoted to the above-mentioned activities related to literature. During the first half an hour, students seemed really motivated and engaged in the classroom activities. The second half an hour was devoted to the different language activities related to the story provided where the learners can enhance their critical thinking abilities, also care was taken by the instructor to develop students four skills of language i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

At the end of the class, the author asked the learners to spend a few minutes of their time answering some questions in the questionnaire set for them. The students unanimously believed that the integrated lesson was a useful one and they had positive opinions about it. They even asked to continue the class in this way since they thought during the class they were doing something meaningful with a clear purpose for their future needs. They also believed that through such lessons they could improve their language and literary skills

Majority of the students liked the group learning activity, where they need to come up with different endings of the story and have to convince the other group members that their conclusion to the story is best. This helped the students develop their convincing and persuading skill also, as they need to reason out why the ending of their story is best.

Through the opinion of the students it could be inferred that they have improved their writing skills and have known how to work as a team in a cooperative and coordinated manner. The task related to the speaking activity the learner expressed satisfaction as they need to make a presentation about the writer and present it in the next class.

In sum, the overall evaluation of the lesson was a successful one and the learners insisted on being exposed to such material and activities for fulfilling their future needs about both English and other subject matters.

CONCLUSION:

Ellis (2003) believes that, "content-based courses are premised on the assumption that learners will best learn language which engages them in learning subject content" (p.74). Based on this quotation we know that a CBI model makes use of a language and a subject matter component. Regarding the subject matter component it has been mentioned throughout the paper that some disciplines such as literature lend themselves better to content-based instruction. Moreover, literature roles in ESL/EFL classrooms are undeniably important in language pedagogy. According to Sagliano and Greenfield (1998), the use of collaborative content-based literature teaching can improve EFL students' motivation and comprehension.

Making use of literature in ESL classrooms is consistent with a focus on the development of English fluency. By discussing the issues in the short story, students can convey thoughts through language use language sophisticatedly and develop their critical thinking, reading,

writing, speaking and listening skills. All in all it could be claimed that a collaborative CBI program with a literature teaching component can boost simultaneous learning of academic subject matter, English language skills and critical thinking abilities.

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