

Content-Based Instruction: A Relevant Approach of Language Teaching

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RESUMEN

La Instrucción Basada en Contenidos es un enfoque en el cual la enseñanza es organizada en torno al contenido. Asimismo, los principios de la Instrucción Basada en Contenidos están fuertemente arraigados en los principios de la enseñanza comunicativa del lenguaje puesto que conllevan una participación activa de los estudiantes en el intercambio del contenido. Este artículo reflexiona sobre la Instrucción Basada en Contenidos como un enfoque relevante de la enseñanza del lenguaje, su historial, la definición del concepto, y sus principios. Además, el artículo informa sobre las características distintivas de la Instrucción Basada en Contenidos y sus principales modelos. Adicionalmente, un plan de lección sobre la Instrucción Basada en Contenidos con sus materiales es proporcionado. Finalmente, un conjunto de conclusiones e implicaciones es también analizado.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Instrucción basada en contenidos, modelos, enfoque, principios, enseñanza.

SUMMARY

Content-Based Instruction is an approach in which the teaching is organized around the content. Likewise, the principles of Content-Based Instruction are heavily rooted on the principles of communicative language teaching since they involve an active participation of students in the exchange of content. This article reflects upon Content-Based Instruction as a relevant language teaching approach, its background, the definition of the concept, and its principles. Moreover, the article reports on Content-Based Instruction's distinctive characteristics and its main models. Additionally, a Content-Based Instruction lesson plan with its materials is provided. Finally, a set of conclusions and implications is also discussed.

KEY WORDS

Content-Based Instruction, models, approach, principles, teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

I can still remember some of my relatives like my grandmother Viviana and especially my mother Alexandra taking turns in a very long queue to get a spot for me in high school. Because of its tradition, academic excellence, and discipline, Instituto Fermin Naudeau was one of the most recognized public high schools in Panama City, Panama. A lot of students applied to it, but many of them were rejected. I got good grades in primary school, so I was lucky enough to be accepted. The high school had a set of mandatory and somehow informal courses for juniors. These

courses had a particularity – they were taught in English. I always thought the main objectives of these courses were to socialize and to make new friends. Believe it or not, I registered in a cooking class. I did enjoy my English lessons in school, my grades were really good, and cooking did not seem that difficult. We started the cooking class with a great deal of success. It was interesting enough that in our regular English lessons, we began to study endless lists of cooking vocabulary, commands, and recipes. I believed it was a coincidence. Without consciously realizing it, my classmates and I started to acquire the target language through content. I also have to admit that I can prepare an absolutely delightful pizza. Now, with my teaching training, one can say that it was a clear manifestation of Content-Based Instruction, hereafter referred to as CBI. CBI is an approach in which the teaching is organized around the content (Brinton, 2003).

This article reflects upon CBI as a relevant language teaching approach, its background, the definition of the concept, and its principles. Likewise, the article reports on CBI's distinctive characteristics and its main models. Moreover, a CBI lesson plan with its materials is also provided. Finally, a set of conclusions and implications is also discussed.

■ Background of CBI

This section is intended to go over the background of CBI. The idea of basing language teaching on content is definitely not a new one. The roots of CBI can be traced back many centuries. St. Augustine pointed out that:

Once things are known knowledge of words follows... we cannot hope to learn words we do not know unless we have grasped their meaning. This is not achieved by listening to the words, but by getting to know the things signified. (as cited in Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989, p. 4)

The publication of Bernard Mohan's work in the mid-1980s was the first appearance of what is known today as CBI. Mohan's Language and Content explored the different ways in which the subject matter and the learning of a language can be achieved (Brinton, 2003). Other authors who made an important contribution in order to launch this approach were Cantoni-Harvey and Crandall (Brinton, 2003). It is quite obvious that the idea of basing language teaching on content is not a new one and its roots can be traced back as early as St. Augustine. These are significant ideas on the background of CBI.

■ What is CBI?

Several definitions of CBI have been provided by different researchers and authors. This section offers pertinent information on the definition of this concept. CBI proposes an approach in which students acquire the target language through content. Richards and Rodgers (2001) say that "Content-Based Instruction refers to an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 204). Content usually refers to the subject matter that people learn or transmit using language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Content-based instruction is "the teaching of language through exposure to content that is interesting and relevant to learners" (Brinton, 2003, p. 201). Snow (2001) goes beyond when defining the concept of content. Snow (2001) said:

Content... is the use of subject matter for second/foreign language teaching purposes. Subject matter may consist of topics or themes based interest or need in an adult EFL setting, or it may be very specific, such as the subjects that students are currently studying in their elementary school classes. (Snow, 2001, p. 303)

These are important definitions of CBI for the purpose of this paper.

■ Principles and distinctive characteristics of CBI

The main principles and some distinctive characteristics of CBI are addressed in this part.

The principles of CBI are heavily rooted on the principles of communicative language teaching since they involve an active participation of students in the exchange of content. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), CBI is based on two relevant principles: (1) People learn a second language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information, rather than as an end in itself. (2) CBI better reflects learners' needs for learning a second language. One can certainly say that people that are faced with everyday needs in a real life situation might find it easier to acquire and use the target language as a tool with a real purpose, for instance, getting food, studying, getting a job, and others.

Brinton (2003) offers some additional principles for CBI that complement the ones offered by Richards and Rodgers (2001). These principles are significant for language teachers intending to use and promote CBI in their lessons and institutions, indeed. These are:

1. Base instructional decisions on content rather than language criteria.

It is true that most books for second language instruction are designed by course planners and material designers, not by language teachers. It is also true that the responsibility to choose and adapt the material to be used in the classroom falls on the language instructor, especially when working with CBI. In fact, CBI permits the choice of content. It is the content itself that determines the pedagogical decisions on selection and sequencing. With regard to

this, Brinton (2003) points out that CBI "allows the choice of content to dictate or influence the selection and sequencing of language items" (Brinton, 2003, p. 206).

2. **Integrate skills.** CBI advocates for an integrated skills approach to language teaching. For example, a regular lesson may begin with any skill or focus such as intonation or any other linguistic feature. This approach also involves the teaching of multiple skills simultaneously, just as in the real world.
3. **Involve students actively in all phases of the learning process.** One of the main characteristics of the CBI classroom is that it is learner-centered, not teacher-centered. Students do not depend on the teacher to control the learning experience. Students play a more active role in the CBI classroom, creating and participating actively in the construction of knowledge. Peer correction and peer input are also significant in this approach.
4. **Choose content for its relevance to students' lives, interests, and/or academic goals.** Content is closely related to the students' needs and instructional settings. For instance, in high schools and universities content parallels the several subjects that learners study. The only difference is that they are taught from a different perspective and with different instructional objectives.
5. **Select authentic texts and tasks.** Authenticity is another significant feature of CBI. Texts and tasks used in CBI come from the real world. It is true that bringing and using authentic material in the class modifies its original purpose (Hutchinson & Waters as cited in Brinton, 2003), but it is also true that the use of authentic material promotes the learning of the culture of the target

language. Moreover, there are several degrees of text authenticity (Helgesen & Brown, 2007). Brown and Menasche (as cited in Helgesen & Brown, 2007) propose five types of text authenticity: genuine text authenticity, altered text authenticity, adapted text authenticity, simulated text authenticity, and inauthentic texts. CBI also claims that comprehensible input is not enough to acquire the target language successfully unlike other approaches and theories (Brinton, 2003). Next, I believe that the use of authentic materials fosters successful acquisition of the target language. Finally, I have to admit that adaptations of authentic materials might be more beneficial for specific groups of learners, for instance beginners.

With regard to the distinctive characteristics of CBI, it is significant to notice that the selection of content in CBI extends for far more than one class (Brinton, 2003). One can say that the use of structured content over a period of time (usually several weeks of instruction) is a significant feature of this approach. Brinton (2003) provides a list of the most common techniques and activities found in the CBI classroom. These techniques and tasks are similar to the ones used in CLT in the sense that they involve learners' active participation. These classroom techniques and tasks are listed here: Pair and group work, information gap, jigsaw, graphic organizers, discussion and debate, role-plays, and others. It is evident that these techniques and tasks are heavily rooted in CLT tenets. Next, Stryker and Leaver (1997) point out that the philosophy of CBI "aims at empowering students to become independent learners and continue the learning process beyond the classroom" (Stryker & Leaver, 1997, p. 3). I totally agree with Stryker and Leaver in the sense that one of the main objectives of language teachers is to demonstrate that students can and should learn on their own. One can teach specific cultural and linguistic features of the

language (prominence, linking, word stress, intonation, lengthening, syncope and others), so learners can really understand the subtleties of the target language. This can be done by using authentic materials. Once students realize they can understand and use authentic materials, they will be more motivated and willing to continue their learning process outside the classroom. Finally, one can conclude that the focus of a CBI lesson is on the subject matter or the topic being studied. In a typical CBI course, students are learning something that interests them using the target language so learners can develop linguistic abilities and can expand their world knowledge. These are significant principles and distinctive characteristics of CBI.

■ Models of CBI

This section is intended to provide a general description of the different models of CBI. Several models of CBI can be identified.

The first one is theme-based language instruction. In this model the syllabus is arranged around themes or topics, for example: The Cuban revolution or endangered species. One of these general themes may provide more specific themes and teaching possibilities for about one or two weeks. There are several ways to introduce a theme: Video and audio material, reading, and/or vocabulary. The materials used to introduce these themes or topics will usually integrate all skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The themes used in these lessons usually take an important number of weeks of instruction. These lessons provide a lot of useful input (Brinton, 2003). Likewise, Brinton (2003) says that this environment promotes successful acquisition of the target language. These themes perform a main role in the CBI curriculum (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). The second model is called sheltered content instruction. Again the main objective is that learners understand the content. The fact that students are still learning the target language makes

the teacher modify the lesson (vocabulary, speed, pace, and others) in order for students to grasp the material. Moreover, the teacher also devotes some class time to explain linguistic elements related to the content of a specific lesson (Brinton, 2003). Richards and Rodgers (2001) point out that the teacher is a content specialist. In general terms, the strategies used by language teachers in this model make the content approachable to students (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). Adjunct language instruction is the third model. Basically, students take two courses, paired or adjuncted courses. These are linked courses. One is a course based on a specific content, and the other course is based on specific linguistic features of the target language. Both courses are complementary (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). A lot of coordination and cooperation is required from both instructors. The main objective of the content class is that students understand the subject matter, and the main objective of the language class is that students improve their language skills. Stryker and Leaver (1997) say that "adjunct courses can enhance students' self-confidence with a feeling of using the new language to accomplish real tasks" (Stryker & Leaver, 1997, p. 4). Sustained- content language teaching is a

recent and innovative model of CBI. It is indeed very similar to theme-based instruction. The difference is that theme-based instruction covers several topics and in SCLT learners work on one topic. The content is "sustained" (Brinton, 2003, p. 205).

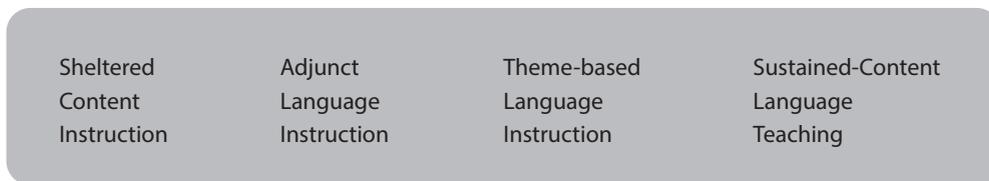
These models have different degrees of emphasis on content and language. Figure 1 illustrates the degrees of emphasis of the above mentioned models. Finally, it is paramount to point out that depending on the academic setting, the distinction among these models might become less marked, since new emerging models have somehow blended significant features (Snow, 2001). These models are the most relevant found in the literature.

■ CBI in the EFL Classroom.....

In order to illustrate this approach, a lesson plan based on a CBI unit is presented here. This lesson plan and materials illustrate the underlying principles of CBI. The lesson plan and materials presented here were part of an ESP course within an EFL environment.

Content-Driven Models

Language-Driven Models



Content-Driven Models

Language-Driven Models

Figure 1. CBI Models: Content and Language Integration

Source: Adapted from Snow (2001)

General Objective

- » Apply listening strategies in order to understand lectures in conferences or classes.

Specific Objectives

- » Use note-taking in real time as a strategy in order to extract the main ideas from a chemistry lecture.
- » Recognize the relevance of discourse markers when listening to a chemistry lecture.
- » Use predicting as a listening strategy to determine the content of a chemistry lecture.
- » Use expressions to give an opinion and ask for clarification when listening to a chemistry lecture.
- » Recognize and use the filler *ah/uh* when expressing an opinion about the content of a chemistry lecture.

Activity 1: (Warm-up) With the aid of handout #1, students go over a set of questions on note-taking/attending a lecture. In pairs, students discuss their ideas (raising awareness). Students and teacher share their ideas in a round-table discussion. Teacher emphasizes the importance of note-taking when listening to a lecture. (10 minutes)

Language: *How do you usually take notes? / I usually... / Generally...*

Activity 2: (Pre-task) With the aid of handout #2, students go over a set of phrases with discourse markers. Students are to analyze the phrases to see if they can deduce the function of discourse markers. Students perform the task. Students share their ideas with the rest of the class. Teacher and students go over the phrases one more time. Teacher emphasizes on the importance of discourse markers to organize a text and to indicate that the speaker is moving on to another part of the speech (discourse markers are to be referred to as 'organizational markers' when working with students in order not to confuse them with metacognitive language). (10 minutes)

Language: *I want to remind you that... / In this particular session... / Another example of...*

Activity 3: Students are asked to predict the content of the lecture 'AP Chemistry Podcast 1.3 Nuclear Chemistry Part 2' (This lecture is available at http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=48083). Students watch and listen to the first minute of the lecture to come up with their predictions. Students share their ideas with the rest of the class. Teacher writes some of the students' ideas on the board. Teacher and students go over key vocabulary from the lecture (activate schemata). Students and teacher do some choral and individual repetition. Teacher clarifies any doubts. (10 minutes)

Language: *Probably the lecture deals with... / To me... / I think that... / Nuclear reactions might be...*

Activity 4: (Task) Teacher writes on the board, Note-taking. Students are asked to mention common things they do when taking notes. Teacher encourages students to come up with

ideas and suggestions on note-taking. Teacher writes some of students' ideas on the board. Teacher and students comment on the importance of taking notes when attending a lecture or a class. (10 minutes)

Language: *Taking notes is useful... / This is important because... / Normally we write things down when...*

Activity 5: Students watch and listen to the short lecture 'AP Chemistry Podcast 1.3 Nuclear Chemistry Part 2'. With the aid of handout #3, students are asked to take notes in real time while the video is being played. Students are also asked to monitor their comprehension by writing discourse markers from the lecture. Teacher plays the video (lecture) and students perform the task. In pairs, students compare their notes to find similarities and differences. Next, students are asked to report on the main and supporting ideas they found in the lecture. Then students are asked to provide the discourse markers from the lecture. Teacher writes them on the board. (20 minutes)

Language: *Nuclear chemistry refers to... / Calculations are... / Fission reactions... / I want to remind you that... / In this particular session... / Another example of...*

Activity 6: With the aid of handout #4, teacher and students go over statements to express an opinion and some questions to ask for clarification. Then students go over some ideas from the lecture to express an opinion and ask for clarification (controlled practice). Teacher and assistant teacher model the activity. Students perform the task. Teacher and students check the exercise orally. (10 minutes)

Language: *It is relevant to mention that... / I do believe that... / I do not think that... / What do you mean by...?*

Activity 7: In pairs, students are asked to go back to their notes from the lecture in order to express an opinion and ask for clarification. Students are given time to practice what they actually have to say before getting engaged in the task. Teacher provides feedback as students practice. Next, students are asked to perform the task in front of the class. (10 minutes)

Language: *I do not clearly understand... / What is it that you...?*

Activity 8: (Language focus) Students listen to an excerpt of the lecture 'AP Chemistry Podcast 1.3 Nuclear Chemistry Part 2'. With the aid of handout #5, students are to focus on the excerpt to identify the filler *ah/uh*. Students fill in the blanks. Students perform the task and report to the class. Teacher comments on the importance of fillers when speaking. Students listen to the excerpt one more time to confirm the importance and usage of fillers. Next, teacher and assistant teacher demonstrate the common usage of fillers when speaking. Teacher asks, Do you think that nuclear chemistry can be dangerous? Assistant teacher provides his opinion emphasizing the use of the filler *ah/uh*. Students are asked to monitor the use of the filler by raising their hand every time they listen to the filler. Then in pairs, students are asked to express their opinion on the lecture using the previous useful expressions and the filler *ah/uh*. Students share their ideas with the rest of the class. (15 minutes)

Language: *Ah, well... / It is relevant to mention that... / I do believe that... / I do not think that... / What do you mean by...? / I do not clearly understand... / What is it that you...?*

Optional activity: Students listen to an excerpt of the lecture 'AP Chemistry Podcast 1.3 Nuclear Chemistry Part 2'. Students are asked to focus on the intonation pattern used in the lecture. Students are to identify the pattern used in the lecture (falling). Students report to the class. If necessary, teacher explains that statements receive a falling intonation. Teacher and students drill. Students listen to the excerpt one more time to confirm the intonation pattern.

Language: *Fission reactions released a tremendous amount of energy.*

Learning Strategies

Brainstorming, recalling, schemata activation, negotiation of meaning, and monitoring

Handout #1

INSTRUCTIONS: Study the following questions. Discuss your ideas with your classmates.

1. How do you usually take notes?
2. What other strategies do you use when you attend a lecture?
3. What happens when you come to a word you do not know? Do you ignore it? Do you try to figure out its meaning by yourself?
4. Do pictures/visuals/diagrams/tables help your understanding of the lecture?
5. What do you do when do not understand information from the lecture?
6. What helps you understand the speaker's attitude in a lecture?
7. What are some difficulties you face when attending a lecture in English?

Handout #2

INSTRUCTIONS: Study the following phrases. What do they have in common? Discuss your ideas with your classmates.

1. The aim of this presentation is to introduce nuclear chemistry.
2. It revealed relevant and positive results.
3. Therefore, the preservative system could be incorporated in several formulations.
4. Another example of this is nuclear fission.
5. First, it is important to establish the context.
6. Next, it is relevant to mention that nuclear reactions might be dangerous.
7. I want to remind you that we will be talking about nuclear chemistry.

Handout #3

Outline for Note Taking in Real Time

Topic / Title: _____ Date: _____

I. Main idea

Supporting ideas

Organizational markers

II. Main idea

Supporting ideas

Organizational markers _____

III. Main idea

Supporting ideas

Organizational markers _____

Handout #4

INSTRUCTIONS: Carefully study and analyze the following phrases.

Expressing an Opinion	Asking for Clarification
It is relevant to mention that...	What exactly do you mean by...?
One can say that...	I am sorry but I do not quite understand what you mean by this / are getting at?
We need to remember that...	I am afraid I am not clear about...
Please notice that...	I am not quite sure I follow you.
As far as I am concerned...	Could you explain what you mean by this, please?
It is usually the case that...	Could you explain why...?
The results suggest it is likely that...	I would like to know if...

INSTRUCTIONS: Consider the following ideas from the lecture.

Student A: Read the statement.

Student B: Express an opinion or ask for clarification.

1. (Ask for clarification) Half-life is the time required for half of any given quantity of a substance to decay.
2. (Ask for clarification) An isotope of cesium has a half-life of 30 years.
3. (Express an opinion) Each split is accompanied by a large quantity of energy.
4. (Express an opinion) Collision of a neutron with a U-235 nucleus can cause the nucleus to split, creating two smaller nuclides and three free neutrons.
5. (Ask for clarification) The three neutrons may travel outward from the fission, colliding with nearby U-235 nuclei, causing them to split as well.
6. (Ask for clarification) If too much energy is produced, the core of the nuclear reactor can be melted down.
7. (Express an opinion) Carbons can absorb extra neutrons in a nuclear reactor.

Handout #5

INSTRUCTIONS: Listen to a short section from the lecture. Fill in the blanks with the appropriate word.

- *3.48 ... and then _____ solve these...
- *3.56 ...I wanna remind you that _____ for most...
- *4.08 ...winds up occurring _____ as the substance...
- *4.46 ...our stable _____ atomic structure...

- | | |
|--------|--|
| *4.57 | ...in the United States _____ because we are... |
| *5.09 | ...so fission is _____ the type of nuclear... |
| *8.28 | ...a generator which _____ produces electricity... |
| *9.43 | ...this nuclei together _____ the nuclei... |
| *9.52 | ... is helium _____ and we... |
| *10.07 | ... could have _____ a relatively cheap... |
| *10.09 | ... and easy _____ form of energy... |
| *10.12 | ...form of energy _____ to suit our needs... |

CONCLUSION

Finally, some conclusions and considerations are discussed here. These can be summarized as follows.

I strongly believe that CBI can be both challenging and rewarding. If students, the administration, and professors are positively involved in the process, this approach could be successful. Personally, I would join CBI with other CLT approach like task-based teaching (in order to provide more meaning) as part of the curriculum in order to help learners to acquire the target language.

Then CBI has become a popular approach in ESL and EFL classrooms basically because learners' motivation seems to increase when students learn about something that interests them, rather than just studying the language (Peachy, n.d.). Language classrooms need to go a step beyond simple grammatical competence in order to promote a real acquisition of the language so students can really function in the target language with all its cultural, linguistic,

and social elements. Canale and Swain (as cited in Stryker & Leaver, 1997) describe four basic components of communicative competence: 1. Grammatical, 2. Discourse, 3. Sociolinguistic, and 4. Strategic competencies. Traditional methods and approaches focus on the first two components, which is the knowledge of structure and linking of sentences. CBI becomes a useful approach when developing communicative competence in learners, basically because it focuses on using the language on specific culturally determined situations and paraphrasing as well. It also works on the development of the language skills within a real context and meaningful purpose (Stryker & Leaver, 1997).

Then Stryker and Leaver (1997) point out that CBI is part of what is considered a new paradigm in the learning-teaching process. It is precisely this idea of having students develop communicative competence that allows them to participate in the target culture. Brown (as cited in Stryker & Leaver, 1997) provides four significant characteristics (shared by some communicative approaches) that serve as a foundation for this new paradigm: 1. All the

previous components are taken into account when establishing the goals. 2. Language techniques in the classroom are used to promote language with meaningful purposes. 3. Fluency and accuracy are complementary elements. 4. Language is used in unrehearsed situations, just like in the real world.

Next, one can certainly say that language teachers are to include more content into their lessons in order to achieve the learning goals. Some grammatical structures, strategic, and socio-linguistic components are easier to teach through the use of specific content. Basically, content provides meaning to everything. Moreover, the learners' needs must be taken into account when selecting the material to be studied in class, so the professor can successfully promote the learning proposal.

Next, Peachy (n.d.) provides some thought-provoking considerations of CBI. This approach can make the learning of the target language a more motivating and interesting process because learners use the language with a real-life purpose. This can make learners more confident and autonomous. Another advantage is the fact that CBI is quite popular among English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers since it helps students to develop and to acquire learning strategies like note taking, summarizing, listening for the gist, and others. Finally, the acquisition of a much wider knowledge of the world through CBI helps learners to develop valuable thinking skills that may be transferred to different subjects in their general education needs.

Additionally, a significant advantage of this approach is the following: CBI enhances motivation, self-confidence, foreign language proficiency, and cultural literacy (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). Finally, Stryker and Leaver (1997) point out that:

When all the pros and cons are considered, content-based instruction offers a challenging but highly rewarding alternative to traditional foreign language approach-

es. We and all our contributors agree with Corin that, in the long run, CBI is worth the pay off. We see that the payoff coming when our students leave our classrooms empowered to become autonomous learners, or in other words, when our nestlings can fly from the nest and soar off across the horizon on their own wings. (Stryker & Leaver, 1997, p. 312)

It is a fact that CBI constitutes one of the most relevant and significant approaches of language teaching, basically because it offers important opportunities to match the learners' needs with meaningful content in order to promote language acquisition.

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