

Content (adj) or Content (n) With Your English Classes?

Robert J. Dickey
Gyeongju University, South Korea

Abstract

Content-based instruction (CBI) is presented as an alternative means of language instruction, where language learning and subject matter learning are integrated in some fashion. The content-enriched language classroom, using thematic or topical (short-term) subject matter, is presented as a means for a language teacher to overcome challenges of content knowledge, conflict with teachers of other subjects, and to focus on course learning objectives where a content-based instruction methodology is sought.

Keywords: Content-based instruction, English learning, Taiwan, Class plan

Introduction

Despite over three decades of discussion and use of content-based instruction (CBI) in language classes across North America, there is no agreement on what this actually means: Crandall and Kaufman (2002, p.1) call this “a diverse set of CBI programs.” Nevertheless, teachers across the globe are using the term to define classes which, to some extent, blend some type of “content subject” with language instruction. A fundamental argument in favor of CBI is that language learning occurs in context, and is consistent with Krashen’s Input Hypothesis while fostering learner motivation and also adding to the learner’s knowledge of the subject area (Kreuger and Ryan, 1993, p. 9). While a comprehensive discussion of all the elements and perspectives of CBI is beyond the scope of this discussion, we may note that in Asia a few examples of “content” in language classes include videos (Furmanovsky, 1997), computers and the internet (Isbell and Reinhardt, 1999), and language teaching methods (Hwang, 2002). One possible reason for the multiple uses of the term is that the scholarly endorsement offered by its frequent appearance in pedagogical publications provides teachers documented justification in their attempts to persuade administrators to accept such novelties.

Content-enhanced language instruction is one of dozens of terms used to describe variations on the focus, degree, and term of content-based instruction. Content-enhanced language instruction will be used here to describe a language course where content is added without

diminishing language learning aims, particularly for short term (single class meeting) lesson plans.

The approach to enriching classes with content presented below has been tested in several environments: initially before a Folk Arts Preservation conference in the Philippines, and also in several English teacher workshops in Korea, as well as in this author’s own classes. This is not a rubric or a fixed design, but rather a template to begin from, and alter according to your own needs.

Fundamentals of Content-based Instruction (CBI)

The general literature

In a search of the World Wide Web one may find hundreds of websites utilizing the term “content-based.” It gets a bit tricky because of the variations in terminology, for example, “content-based language learning,” “content based language instruction” (no hyphen), and “content-based language teaching” are three variations that would not be found if one typed in “content-based instruction;” yet the search term “content-based” will also bring up pages relating to computerized content-based image retrieval, content-based advertising, and content-based messaging (Yahoo.com search of November 15, 2004). Relevant terms not incorporating “content-based” are no less important: “Teaching English Across the Curriculum,” “Teaching Through English,” “Immersion,” “Content and Language Integrated Learning” (CLIL), to name just a few (see the website <http://www.content-english.org> for

additional terms in use).

Also of interest is the duration of the content: terms such as “topical,” “thematic” and “sustained” have been offered as cues to length of any particular subject matter, ranging from less than one full lesson to a full semester or year.

Hutchinson and Waters (1984) contrast CBI with more traditional forms of instruction: [i]n a content-based approach, the focus is on exploiting the information conveyed by a text. In a language-based approach, the text is used as a source for language exercises” (p. 113).

Defining “content”

Brinton, Snow, and Wessche (1989) have provided the most frequently cited definition of content-based instruction: where “the target language [is viewed] largely as the vehicle through which the *subject matter* is learned,” however, many readers neglect the remainder of the sentence, “rather than as the immediate object of study” (p. 5, emphasis added), and lines from earlier in the book, “the integration of *particular content* with language teaching aims,” and “[m]ore specifically ... concurrent teaching of *academic subject matter* and second language skills” (p. 2, emphasis added). It seems that this definition calls for great focus on the content – whatever content may be.

As Snow (1991) observes, “[t]hroughout the history of second language teaching, the word ‘content’ has had many different interpretations” (p. 315) and CBI “is not so much a method as a reorientation to what is meant by ‘content’ in language teaching.” (p. 326).

Suitable areas for use as content seem limitless. Beyond traditional academic courses (anything that could be a university “major field of study”), arguments have been made in favor of Academic Skills and almost any other topic area. Prodromou (1992) and Shih (1992) suggest that culture, personal, and professional interests are all viable areas for “content.” Short (1991) offers the topic of “littering” in a model lesson (presumably under a theme of environmentalism in either social studies or science classes). Murphey (1997) includes journalism, TV commercials, and health and fitness awareness. Courses in English literature, once ruled out by this author, are another option. Furmanovsky (1997) has observed that content courses taught via English as a Foreign Language in Asia “are necessarily different from so-called content-based courses offered to ESL students in overseas [ESL] universities. The latter are designed for intermediate and upper intermediate students who hope to enter overseas junior colleges or universities.” Such arguments are the basis for courses such as his video class.

What is clear is that language teachers are far more interested in and comfortable with the teaching of language through use of content than the idea that language is a mere vehicle through which

to learn subject-matter. The term “content-based language instruction” (CBLI) appears to be more appropriate for this aim. We may also consider the concept of “strong” and “weaker” versions of CBI (paralleling the design of Skehan, 1996, for task-based learning, and Atherton’s (n.d.) comments on problem-based learning), where a “strong version” of content-based instruction stays truer to the original design of language as a vehicle or medium through which content is studied, and a “weaker version” supplies greater focus for the language elements. It could be argued that many chapter themes in existing language learning textbooks qualify as “content” in this continuum of content-focus.

We are therefore left only with the conclusion, like Stryker and Leaver (1997, p. 3), that CBI is “more a philosophy than a methodology” and even so, not all teachers are listening to the same philosophers.

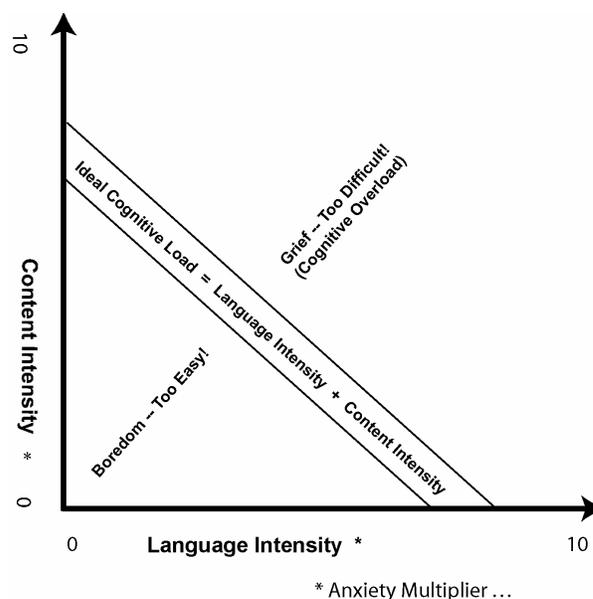
Cognitive Load

Few discussions of content-based instruction consider the issue of how the additional learning fits within learning capacities. Simply adding content to a language course, or a new language to a pre-existing content-course, may overwhelm learners. The issue of “adding too much” falls under the recent science of

cognitive load theory. “Cognitive load refers to the total amount of mental activity imposed on working memory at an instance in time” (Cooper, 1998). Cognitive load theory considers both the complexities of individual items to be learned and cognitive processes through instructional design, specifically considering both working memory and longer term memory, where schemas to deal with understood complexity reside, and also consider additional factors such as motivation and anxiety (see Sweller, 1994; and Pass, Renkl, and Sweller, 2003). Discussing the same issue, Skehan (1996, 50) refers to this situation as “processing load,” and voices concern that too much attention to meaning (linguistic or content) can divert mental processing resources from other linguistic processing (learning) activities.

Cognitive load theory tells us what computer engineers and good teachers (and parents) already know, that (mental) data processing may be able to attend several things concurrently, but that the more difficult one item is, the less capacity one has to consider another matter. “Multi-tasking” is a reality but it has its price. In real terms for the classroom, this means that the more difficult one factor is (e.g., the language), the less attention can be dedicated to another (e.g., the content). Figure 1 displays the cognitive load issue.

Figure 1. Cognitive Load



Enriching English Classes with Content

There are few absolutes in English teaching, this is a profession where “intelligent eclecticism” is the contemporary rule. The wise teacher investigates numerous approaches, methods, and activities, drawing the best from each while remaining focused on the learner’s and the teacher’s own principles. Under this approach, teachers may utilize concepts such as “task-based instruction,” “problem-based learning,” “communicative approach,” or almost any other while bringing some form of content into the lesson to assist in learner motivation. I would observe here that some textbooks have particularly good stories or themes that are ripe for further development as content—not all content-based lessons must come from beyond the textbook.

In teachers’ discussions of content-based instruction, there are always concerns for teacher qualification/knowledge of the content-matter and classroom preparation requirements. In “sustained content language teaching” (Pally, 2000) such concerns are very legitimate, particularly at the secondary and tertiary school levels. Few English teachers feel prepared to teach a Biology or History class at a level roughly equivalent to that which students would do in their native language – which is the concept of “Teaching Through English” or “Foreign Language Medium Instruction” (see Han and Dickey, 2001). Similarly, English teachers may be concerned that their instruction may conflict or unnecessarily replicate the lessons of other courses. The content-enriched class, however, does not face these issues because content is introduced at the thematic or topical (short term) level, does not overlap with other courses (or such overlap is intentional and planned), and is often based on the English teachers’ own areas of interest or past studies.

A Framework for constructing a content-enriched class plan

Many teachers might choose to alter the order of items presented below,

particular shifting numbers 4 and 5 to before items 2 and 3. I find that it is often easier to identify things that may be useful in classes in the future, and hold them until the time suits, than to attempt to locate materials for particular language needs, but both systems are workable. Again, this is a framework to help teachers develop concepts which can then become more structured lesson plans.

1. Identify the specific course and group of students to teach.

It may be that a number of classes can share a common lesson plan, even from different courses, but equally likely, classes operating under the same syllabus may require different lesson plans. This is the reality that teachers address each day, and utilizing a content-enriched lesson plan is no different. Any lesson plan begins with the audience.

2. Identify the content to be utilized.

Both the general subject area, and a narrow focus area, need to be identified early. As indicated above, the content can be from any number of areas, ranging from traditional school subject areas to television cartoons or comic books. Many teachers are addressing global awareness issues, including environmentalism and global citizenship. The Philippine workshop this paper derives from focused on local culture, including martial arts, cuisine/cooking, indigenous (mountain) practices, even the relationship between a prospective husband and the family he wished to woo.

3. Identify why the students should care.

An entry point, from students’ current interests, must be identified, and suitable transitions to the content to be utilized, created. A kung-fu movie has its own attractions, as does pop music, but introducing a mathematics project or weather study may require more thought. One approach is to introduce the issue from an instance of the students’ own lives.

4. Identify the specific “teaching point.”

Which aspect of the course syllabus (language, grammar, etc) can be taught through this content? For many teachers, content becomes a sort of “time out” from regular instruction: a reward for good behavior or break from a strenuous study period (e.g., immediately after national exams). However, most syllabus are far too crowded, and most teachers simply can’t afford to “waste” class hours on activities or events not addressing the learning objectives of the course. It is essential, for the long-term viability of content-use in language courses, that there be language learning (not mere “review”) in content-enhanced language learning lesson plans. As an example, one element for storytelling is contrasting the use of, and purpose for, past tense versus present perfect, past perfect, and the progressive forms of these. Storytelling will therefore serve a purpose, but which story to use may be an issue of student interest, or supporting learner challenges in another subject (e.g., history or social studies).

5. Develop/locate an exemplar text.

This text may be literature, or it may be a video (for listening practice), but consistent with the general norms for language education, one cannot expect learners to produce (in written or oral forms) before they have received an input (modeling). In general, CBI is heavily dependent on written text, though the more contemporary concepts in Asia have devolved from this practice. Note that a website is, largely, text, but an image may be so profound as to evoke language from the learners: where accuracy is not the key concern for a lesson, an image might be used instead of a written (or heard) text. Depending on the aims of the course, this “text” may be presented more than once, may be used for comprehension testing or simply as a model for other purposes, and may be presented by the teacher/program alone or students may be given copies of the material. The text may be the root for a task or problem in a task-based or problem-based teaching design, or simply an activity much like those found in many language learning textbooks.

6. Design student responses to the text.

While we may not be able to predict entirely “how” students will react to the content, we can plan for “what” the students should do in their reactions. Unlike many “teaching through English” courses, where language learning may receive little focus and mastery of content takes precedence, in content-enhanced language learning classes mastery of the content is of little importance and language growth deserves the bulk of the teacher’s attention. This also provides contrast with many “task-based language learning” designs where the process of communicating (fluency) takes precedence over accuracy – in a content-enhanced language classroom the teacher makes a specific choice whether a focus is on fluency or accuracy. Thus, while in a literature class simply reading and enjoying, possibly analyzing, a piece of classic prose or poetry is an end in itself, in the content-enhanced language learning class such literature is merely the starting point for language practice... even if no overt language teaching is part of the model. The Focus on Forms / Focus on Meaning / Focus on Form distinction by Michael Long (1997) is helpful in considering this issue of overt instruction versus non-instruction versus indirect instruction.

For many of the more humanistic and communicative approaches to language instruction, steps seven through nine are also incorporated.

7. Students check their own work, and that of their peers.

Not only does this decrease the amount of work done by the teacher (or increase the amount of feedback received by students, were the teacher to not mark papers based on excessive workload), but it increases student practice in error-spotting (a very common testing mechanism) and encourages peer support in the learning process. This peer review also can be done as homework, rather than in class time.

8. Students create new stories, new endings, and tell the stories to groupmates.

Story-telling encourages creativity, and can enhance logical thinking skills, particularly where the teacher sets a few constraints that require learners to “think outside the box” of simplistic/common outcomes. Students may practice either or both oral and written skills as part of this process.

9. Groupwork.

Based on the nature of the course and aims, and easily modified based on how quickly or slowly the class has progressed, an element of groupwork might include creating a new group story and performing such a story as a skit or play before classmates. Posters or other forms of reporting are also possible – these may be new group stories, or summaries of each member’s stories.

10. Testing

Testing in the content-enhanced language learning classroom is no different from a non-content language learning classroom. In this environment, content has been provided as a vehicle to study and practice language, essentially, the inverse of the definition provided by Brinton et al. near the top of this discussion. This is not to suggest that content-matters must be excluded from the test—merely that teachers must inform students before the lesson is concluded whether or not this is a mere “activity” that can be safely discarded or whether the content too will become part of the learner’s assessment.

A model content-enrichment lesson concept

Mathematics teachers in the Philippines created an integrated plan using mathematics and culture along with English, incorporating a math riddle... and it wasn’t some variation on the classic problem concerning trains departing two different cities on a collision course! In this lesson learner’s prior knowledge of their own culture was combined with an everyday occurrence and a mathematics problem. This particular math problem could be introduced through a reading, a discussion of local wedding cultures, or even a short video presenting the practice

of an evening serenade by a prospective suitor for a young lady’s hand in marriage. The language target would be both “math language” and conditionals—depending on learner skills, a number of language choices can be made, for this example we will use “What if...” and “Then it would...” forms. Both the geometry rules and the language points (math language and conditionals) appear in the exemplar text, or perhaps a quick sketch of a triangle with notation of the English terminology for the various elements is displayed.

After the exemplar text, all know that a hopeful groom has the duty to bow before his prospective new parents-in-law at a 45 degree angle, thereby displaying the top of his head. On one particular evening he approaches the family home, planning to serenade them while playing his guitar. The family are standing on the roof of the two-storey house (i.e., 6 meters above ground) to enjoy the cool breeze on a hot and sultry evening. How far away from the house must the young man stand in order to show his respect yet not bend his back? (Answer is provided below author’s note.) What if it were only a one-storey house? What if they were on the veranda of a house on stilts (nipa hut)? What if the ground were sloped away from the house at a 30 degree angle?

Conclusion

Content-based instruction is like a small blanket on a large bed shared by many children, each pulling in their own direction. Either the blanket must stretch to meet all needs, or be torn to shreds. This author has argued elsewhere (Dickey, 2001) that CBI is in need of new definitions, or else it may suffer as a whole concept when or if certain “branches” (such as using TV commercials as content for general listening courses) are challenged.

The content-enriched language classroom, using a thematic (short-term) subject, is a means for a language teacher to overcome the challenges of “mastering” a content field, minimizing conflict with teachers of other subject areas, and remaining focused on the course learning objectives. Such a language teaching design does not require syllabus change or

major adjustments by teachers or students, and can be utilized as a first step towards teaching “regular content” courses through the medium of English.

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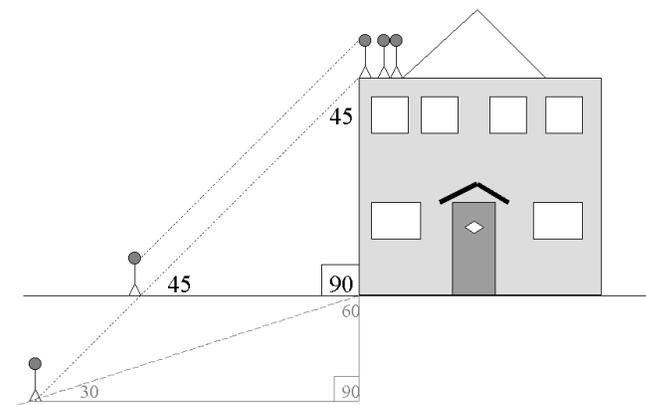
The Author

Robert J. Dickey has been teaching EFL and content courses in Korea since 1994, the past six years at Gyeongju University. He is the coordinator of the website www.content-english.org where a number of ideas on content-based instruction may be found. His own teaching of content courses has included culture, American Law, Public Finance, Public Administration, Alternate History, and assorted short courses in management and other subjects, and he regularly adds “outside content” to his lessons as well as extending the readings of interesting topics within the coursebooks.. He received the RSA C-TEFLA in Hastings England in 1996, with Juris Doctor and Master of Public Administration degrees prior to that in his home state of California. Email: rjdickey@content-english.org

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Answer to the math content-riddle: In a “right triangle,” one angle is 90 degrees – this is the case of the wall of the house and the ground. The remaining two angles equal 90 degrees, in order for one (the family view) to be 45 degrees the other must be also. Where the angles are equivalent, so too are the lengths of the opposite sides, hence if the distance from ground to family is 6 meters, then the young man must stand the same distance from the house (e.g., 6 meters). The height of the adults are equal, so the angles are unchanged. If we must consider the ground slope, it is simply another triangle, with a 30/60/90 degree angles configuration to add to the math complexity. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Illustration of Riddle



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