

Successful Employment of Content Based Learning Instruction for EFL University Students

Jack Pudelek¹

¹Kwansei Gakuin University

jackpudelek@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

This paper looks at how content based learning can be highly beneficial to English foreign language learners at the university level. It discusses how CBL can assist students to implicitly acquire the target language in much the same way they do with their first language rather than be explicitly taught it.

Keywords

Content based learning instruction, EFL university instruction

Introduction

Recent research has indicated that second language learning and acquisition are achieved through a collaborative interactional process, whereby learners start to appropriate the language of interaction for their own purposes (Donato, 1994, 2000; Engerstrom & Middleton, 1996; Gibbons, 2003; Ohta, 1995, 1999, 2006; Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Wells, 1999). Furthermore, social theories of language suggest whether people learn a language, their ability to control their use of it and for what purpose they use it are dependent on the social interactional situations, which they encounter (Halliday, 1993; Painter, 1984, 1998). Therefore, it is not surprising that recent years have seen an increase in the appearance of Content Based Learning (CBL) in EFL university curricula. The purpose of these CBL classes is often to prepare learners for the required level and the rigorous challenges of academic programs abroad. In such programs, students' academic success will depend upon their level of preparedness and they will need to learn and widen their knowledge of the required content so as not to trail behind native classmates. Another purpose of these classes is to prepare students for foreign workplace environments or domestic workplace environments where a high proficiency of English (often in a specific field) is required.

CBL instruction uses the content topic as a means of implicit language instruction in contrast to traditional language teaching, which

uses a language focus such as explicit grammar instruction or vocabulary lists. Instruction must be adjusted to meet the needs of the language learner, therefore the content should be chosen based upon their needs and interests. The course should feature the uses the learner will make of the target language in the future, build on their previous learning experience and expose them to meaningful language in use.

The ultimate goal of a CBL course should be the acquiring of information through the second language and at the same time developing academic language skills. The hope is that these skills will transfer to other academic courses given in their second language (Brinton, 1989). The classes should use authentic reading materials that allow students to think and learn via the second language in order to interpret and evaluate the text.

Theme or topic-based language courses are ones where the language is based around topics or themes. The content material allows for language analysis, as well as practice. Students attain higher levels of language processing, for example comparing and contrasting, separating facts and opinions, looking for evidence and inferencing.

Sheltered courses feature content courses taught by a content area specialist to a group of second language learners in a low-anxiety environment. The native speaking teacher should make adjustments and simplifications, grading the content to a level suitable for their students, slightly above their level of comprehension, containing some new element to be acquired by them, as per Krashen's (1981) theory of comprehensible input. Both theme based and sheltered courses include only ESL students so it is possible to adapt content to the needs of the particular students in the class.

Reading and writing should be employed as linked cognitive tasks. Readers must modify their existing schemata to allow for new information building their knowledge base. Writing should be an interactive task, which promotes the forming of meaning and synthesis of information from other texts (Kasper, 2000).

After analyzing the needs of university students there are some common themes. Students need to improve their language skills, pass assessment tests, be able to comprehend lectures and take notes effectively, be able to understand and answer questions and employ critical thinking.

One teaching approach, which works well in content-based programs include cooperative learning. Students can work together in small groups, taking part in tasks where they exchange knowledge and experiences, which allows for connections with the content and language.

Instructors of CBI must understand the challenges L2 learners face and in turn be able to adapt their teaching, activities, assignments and evaluation to help learners overcome their language shortcomings. Learners should be given scaffolding in terms of language but also in terms of the concepts within the content in order to understand the complex ideas within the authentic texts.

There are a number of advantages to a content based syllabus. Content based classes teach language relevant to the learner and therefore they tend to lead to increased motivation and in turn a better learning environment. A CBL syllabus allows learners to learn subject matter and language simultaneously. Language is used in context, naturally and authentically. The content matches what the learners need to learn. The approach allows for integration of all four skills and the use of genuine materials.

The CBL approach also has some disadvantages. One weakness is that it can lead to fossilization if learners decide to use simple sentence structures to survive. Students may become overly reliant on compensatory communication strategies, only using what is comfortable. The approach can be overwhelming for beginning or low level students. The approach may not be effective where achievement is measured by tests focusing on narrowly defined formal features of the TL. Also CBL classes often focus on reading and listening skills so do not guarantee successful communicative ability.

It is considering all of these points that a content based film studies class was developed in my current teaching context and it has been vastly successful in motivating students, promoting learning of both content and language and successful language acquisition. I will attempt to measure improvements in speaking fluency with a research project next semester.

References

Brinton, M., Snow, D & Wesche, M. (1989) *Content-Based Second Language Instruction*. Michigan Classics Edition.

Michigan.

Gibbons, P. (2003) *Mediating Language Learning: Teacher Interactions With ESL Students in a Content-Based Classroom*. TESOL Quarterly, 37 (2) 247-273.

Kasper, L., et al (2000) *Content – Based College ESL Instruction*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. New Jersey.

Short, D. (1993) *Assessing Integrated Language and Content Instruction*. TESOL Quarterly 27 (4) 627-656.