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CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION: A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH FOR THE EFL CLASSROOM

Todd Hull

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, South Korea
toddhull@hufs.ac.kr

Abstract

Content-Based Instruction (CBI)¹ is a justifiably popular method in the ESL/EFL classroom because it combines the improvement of competency in a foreign language with the attainment of knowledge in various subjects that occur in academic curricula across the spectrum of higher education. CBI has two main focuses. One concentrates on imparting knowledge of a particular subject matter with a secondary goal of improving language ability. The other aims primarily at the improvement of communicative competence in the target language. The focus of this paper is on this second aspect. Here learners are first given content that provides a basic overview of a particular subject or current issue. They are then tasked with performing various classroom activities that promote proficiency in the target language through engaging with the subject matter. The great advantage of this format is that, in addition to improving students' general knowledge about the world, practice in all four major skills is given in the course of a single lesson. Reading is enhanced when students research the topic to be addressed in class. Writing is practiced when students do timed essays, which not only improves their writing but also simulates writing done for language assessment tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS. Opportunities to improve listening and speaking come when students engage classmates in discussions about the topics addressed in class. This paper gives practical examples of how to implement such lessons in the EFL classroom as CBI continues to become more relevant now and into the future.



Keywords

CBI, Content-based Instruction, CLIL, Communicative Approach, Multiple Skills Practice, Classroom Applications, Fluency, Pair Work

1. Introduction

Content-based instruction has been gaining in popularity over the past decades, and for good reason—it promotes proficiency in a foreign language in a way that no other type of language instruction can. It combines learning outside the narrow focus of bettering language skills with giving students academic knowledge. It “brings together both content and language in hopes of providing educators with a real-time response that is context driven, so that education in a second or foreign language can be successful.” (McDougald 2016). In CBI students learn “naturalistically” through negotiating meaning in contexts not specifically geared towards a “focus on form” (practicing specific grammar points, for example). Students study ideas of academic importance from art and literature to science and technology and, through meaning-focused engagement with the content of that material, improve their proficiency in the target language, all without specifically working toward that goal though language-focused practice. Focus on form is, in my opinion, both necessary and valuable for students of foreign languages. But it is a supplement—not the main dish—in a CBI classroom. This paper will review some of the benefits of and justifications for the kind of naturalistic learning that CBI provides and offer some practical advice on how it can be used in the EFL classroom, including fluency-building activities.

2. Literature Review

Discontent with learners emerging from classrooms in which excessively grammar-focused approaches like the grammar-translation method produced students who could talk *about* the language they had studied but could not talk *in* that language led EFL researchers and practitioners to explore new ways of producing users of language rather than commenters on it. What emerged is broadly called the communicative approach, described by the British Council as being “based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning.” So “when learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language.” (British Council 2017) The communicative approach does not always dispense completely with a focus on form, however. Instead, there are varying degrees of

emphasis on focus on form within the broad spectrum of methodologies constituting the communicative approach.

2.1 Focus on form

At one end is the presentation-production-practice (PPP) model, a form-focused method which is basically an updated form of the old grammar-focused methods. As its name suggests, lessons in this vein introduce a specific language point and have learners produce accurate examples of it. It differs from grammar translation, though, in that it then moves on to a communicative part, which comes in having students use the language they have practiced to engage in actual communication rather than just stopping at the production phase. So instead of just practicing something like the past tense in some rote fashion and stopping there as was often the case in the old grammar-translation classrooms, learners might do something like talk with a classmate about their childhood or a memorable experience they had in the past, something that speakers of a language do in real conversation.

2.2 “Naturalistic” learning

Representative of the other end of the spectrum is Stephen Krashen (1982), who advocates language learning with virtually no focus on form. Krashen advocates for the position that not only do learners acquire language more effectively sheerly through exposure to the target language, but that focus on form actually impedes language learning. His method has learners doing things like reading books written at a level basic enough for them to comprehend the material. Then when they gain the confidence to begin producing language based upon acquisition they have done at an unconscious level through exposure to natural language, they can start doing so, at their own pace, without being forced into production that is outside their comfort level. Krashen and other advocates of this type of learning, e.g. Van Patten (2010) draw, amongst others, upon research like that of Manfred Pinemann (1985) who says that there is a certain order in which students acquire aspects of grammar and that curricula centered around focus on form will almost always force students to study grammar they are not yet ready to acquire. Pinemann (1989) claims this is not just unproductive but actually harmful to students' progress. This is echoed by Lightbown and Spada (2013). Patrick Skehan's (1998) seminal book, *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning* was another early criticism of the PPP model upon which later criticisms were built.

2.3 Efficacy of focus on form and naturalistic learning

Research supports to varying degrees the efficacy of both ends of this spectrum. Nick Ellis (2002a) suggests that collocations in the target language (bacon and eggs, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, for example) are learned more effectively if implicitly acquired through

exposure to natural language without the learner focusing explicitly on connecting the individual parts of the collocation. This is accomplished through “adjacency and many repetitions.” (Ellis 2002b) rather than through explicit practice with those collocations.

But Paul Nation (2001) and others cite research supporting the use of at least some focus on form in the classroom. Norris and Ortega’s classic metanalysis (2000) of the efficacy of at least some focus on form still holds mostly true today. Celce-Murcia (2002) makes the case for teaching grammar in context, using texts to put aspects of grammar in authentic settings to give learners a view of how the language occurs naturally. Rod Ellis (2005) proposes ten principles for instruction in another language that emphasize what Krashen (1982) calls “comprehensible input,” but also include some focus on form and, at later stages, output, which has been famously defended by Merrill Swain (2005).

2.4 The overall efficacy of CBI

Regardless of whether focus on form is used or not used in a CBI classroom, the consensus is that CBI is an effective methodology. A large study by Simone Smala (2013) of programs in Australia found that CBI was overwhelmingly beneficial. A comparative study by Ibarrola (2012) showed “a clear advantage for the CLIL group.” Vázquez (2014) shows that in CBI classrooms, “students produce fewer lexical transfer errors than non-CLIL students.” And Castellano-Risco (2018) says of her study comparing CLIL and non-CLIL learners that “it can be concluded that CLIL instruction seems to benefit the acquisition of foreign language and may also have an influence on the use of certain vocabulary learning strategies.”

2.4.1 CBI and student motivation

Another reason CBI is so effective in the classroom is that it motivates students. An analysis by Martin Lamb (2017) supports this conclusion. A study by Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra (2014) concluded that there was a statistically significant advantage in motivation for CBI students over students studying a foreign language in other contexts. Research by Sajima (2013) shows that students have an overwhelmingly positive view of their CBI classroom experiences. It is well-known that motivated students learn better than ones who are not enthusiastic about what they are studying. So CBI’s motivational effect is another reason to make it a part of the EFL learning environment.

2.5 Combining naturalistic learning and focus on form in the classroom

As mentioned above, many of those following the communicative approach in the classroom follow Rod Ellis’s lead and adopt a comprehensive, varied approach. Like Krashen, practitioners of CBI present learners with material in the target language via comprehensible

input for them to digest and learn from. In CBI, this is normally related to a given area of academic knowledge identified in a student needs analysis as being something that would benefit learners in both their knowledge of the world and in acquiring the language they are studying. And if during the course of engaging the topic, there are linguistic issues that require special treatment due to repeated student errors or questions from students, instructors will often give linguistic support in the form of focus on the language point in question.

2.6. Sheltered instruction or “authentic” texts

A final decision practitioners of CBI have to make is whether to use original texts or to provide “sheltered” instruction by giving learners summaries of the originals that leave out detrimental complexity but still give students the gist of the text, all the while maintaining the all-important natural, native-speaking language that learners need to further their skills. This decision is dependent on the needs of the students in a given learning environment. With some types of texts, great works of literature, for example, original texts should be used whenever possible. But, as Pace (2017) points out, learner needs and level need to be taken into careful consideration. Works of non-fiction on the other hand can very often be profitably adapted for the above-mentioned sheltered instruction. In this paper I will provide an example of sheltered instruction in which information on a topic is presented in summarized form for learners to engage.

Table 1: *What to consider when planning a CBI lesson*

Focus on form?	Yes	If it is done in a communicative manner and is supplemental—not the main element
	No	If it becomes the main focus
Naturalistic learning?	Yes	Gives learners comprehensible input in context so they can see how all the linguistic elements interact
Sheltered learning?	Yes	Gives students comprehensible input that they can process efficiently and productively
“Authentic” texts?	No	Often so complex that students are turned off by them. Can be used if instructor sees fit.



3. Implementing the lesson in the classroom

The lesson this paper revolves around lasts approximately 100 minutes and is for freshmen at a top-tier university in South Korea. The principles are applicable across the spectrum, however, and the content will depend on the learning environment. The practices utilized are, in short: provide learners with comprehensible input; check their comprehension; answer questions they may have; have them react to the content in writing; and finally, have them exchange their ideas in conversation with classmates. I will briefly outline the step-by-step process of the lesson and then go on to discuss how the endeavor furthers the language ability of the learners.

3.1 Preliminary steps

The lesson is 100 minutes, but I often broach the topic the class before with a quick five-minute written response to the simple question, “Do you think most of our personality comes from genes or the environment?” That is followed by a 5 to 10-minute discussion students have with partners about their opinions. This sets the context for the lesson in the next class. The original source material for the lesson is an academic paper by Harvard University psychology professor, Steven Pinker entitled *Why nature & nurture won't go away*. (Pinker 2004) My one-page summary of parts of the article (Appendix A) is the material I use for class, and provides the comprehensible input. I assign the reading for homework along with some comprehension questions about the main points in it for homework.

3.2 Checking comprehension

I begin the 100-minute class by re-eliciting from students as a warm-up the dichotomy briefly addressed in the last class, namely the debate about how much of our personality comes from genes and how much from the environment. I then have the students take out the comprehension questions they did for the homework and go over the answers, taking student questions as they arise. This helps assure that the students understand the material well enough to engage it in the main body of the lesson.

3.3 The written production phase

Students then respond to the topic by giving their opinion about where personality comes from and justifying their views with specific reasons and examples. In my class, they can choose from a variety of paragraph formats we practice during the semester, such as reasons/examples, cause/effect, opinion, opinion with counterargument, and so on (Ward and Gramer 2014). But instructors can tailor the written output to their own classes. It can be unstructured free-writing, bullet-point notes, or even in the form of practice for the written sections of standardized tests like the TOEFL and IELTS. Instructors can even choose to



forgo the written phase entirely and just go straight to the speaking phase. But I find it helpful for students to have something written down to organize their thoughts.

3.4 The oral production phase

After the students have given a written response, they discuss and debate their opinions with classmates. This is conducted according to the main principle of the communicative approach, that learners communicate real meaning rather than memorized dialogs, drills, etc.. I sometimes have students begin by listening to and writing down word-for-word, dictation-style, their partner’s topic sentence. J.D. Brown (2005) says of dictation:

The skills involved are at least listening comprehension and writing, but different aspects of these two skills come into play as well...distinguishing between phonemes is important as are grammar, vocabulary, and spelling knowledge. In short, dictation is testing many different things at the same time and does so in the context of extended text. Advocates...would argue that such a test is complex in a similar fashion to the ways actual language use is complex. They would also argue that language tested in integrative procedures like dictation...is being tested in the more natural, or at least larger, context of extended text.

I am one of those advocates. I believe that dictation is a highly effective form of language practice. But the problem with it is that it is just plain boring. Who wants listen to the professor (or a recording!) read something out and then have to write it down? I solve this problem by limiting dictations to just their partner’s topic sentence. This gives the benefits of dictation without the negative aspect of boredom.

After students have written their partner’s topic sentence down, they take notes on their partner’s support for their² opinion. They then change partners and discuss their ideas again. I normally have students pair up with three partners in a single lesson. But instructors can tailor this to their own classrooms.

Table 2: *Phases of the implementation of a CBI lesson*

1. Provide comprehensible input. ⇒	2. Check student comprehension of material. ⇒	3. Written response to text. ⇒	4. Oral presentation of ideas about text.
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3.5 Building fluency

Students writing down their ideas and relating them to multiple partners is also a fluency-building activity. Characteristic of definitions of fluency in the EFL literature is “the ability to talk at length without hesitation – no searching for words, no long pauses.”



(Thundercliff 2015) But I favor the description given by one of my graduate school professors, who defined it as “language which is comprehensible, easy to follow, has few distracting errors, and exhibits little hesitation.”

Paul Nation (2001) lays out four criteria for fluency-building activities:

- 1) The activity should involve only known vocabulary and grammatical features, and preferably familiar content knowledge.
- 2) The activity should be meaning-focused.
- 3) There should be some encouragement to do the activity at a speed faster than learners’ normal speed.
- 4) The activity should involve a large quantity of language processing. That is, learners should be reading or writing texts several hundred words long, or speaking and listening for several minutes.

The way the activity is conducted in my classroom accords with criterion number one both in that students have familiarized themselves with the material before responding to it and also that the content of their responses is student-generated, so it is composed using vocabulary and grammar known to the students. All communication is also meaning-focused since students are engaged in actual discourse rather than rote recitation or some other non-communication-oriented activity. As for criterion three, I substitute repetition (students relate their ideas to multiple interlocutors) for pushing them to do it at a faster pace. Repetition also contributes to fluency. And not pushing the students for speed allows for a bit more relaxed classroom atmosphere. (In classes I’ve taught specifically for test prep—TOEFL speaking, for example—I did push students to go at a higher speed, and the method was very helpful.) Students in my classes typically produce texts of 2-300 words and speak with each partner for about fifteen minutes, which more or less accords with the fourth criterion.

4. Discussion

4.1 Research supporting student-generated, creative output

This type of activity has many benefits. First, research shows that when students have to *create* using the target language, they learn more effectively than memorizing language points, or even contextualized practice (DeKeyser, 1998 and Ellis 2003). Responding to the topic requires students to create their own language and thus fits with these findings. This accords with the aforementioned study by Ibarrola (2012), who found that learners in CBI environment outperform those in non-CBI settings, especially in morphosyntactic development.



4.2 CBI and motivation

When students give their own opinions rather than being forced to restate information from required texts, it motivates them more strongly. And the benefits of motivation in the acquisition of another language are well known (e.g. Sajima 2013).

4.3 Uses of CBI in presenting logical arguments

Having students format their responses in the form of widely used writing formats such as reasons/examples, cause/effect, opinion with counterargument, etc. not only gives learners practice honing their skills with essential forms of organization used in academic discourse, it also helps students in the area of presenting their arguments logically, which is of special importance in the East Asian context, as has been emphasized by Masumi (2018) and others.

4.4 Uses of CBI in preparation for standardized tests

As was alluded to above, in addition to practicing basic expository writing formats like reasons/examples, cause/effect, opinion, etc., the CBI classroom can be used to prepare students for the written sections of standardized tests such as the TOEFL integrated writing task and IELTS writing task 2, practice that can be very helpful to the many learners who will go on to take these tests in the future.

4.5 Maintaining learner momentum and energy

A final advantage of the rotating partners aspect of the lesson is that it addresses the perennial problem of maintaining student attention and energy for engaging classroom material. Numerous creative and constructive ideas to accomplish this have been proposed, including those of Chang & Zhu (2018) in their excellent 5:20:20:5 framework. In that framework, a fifty-minute timespan is broken into smaller chunks to make the most of the time allotted for a class. Chang & Zhu state that student attention span is 10-15 minutes, and in the lesson I've outlined here, students spend 10-15 minutes with each partner, following Chang & Zhu's attention-span timing almost to the letter. Not only does this divide tasks into efficient chunks of time, it also "gets the blood flowing" every time students get up and move around the room to find a new partner, thus infusing them with new energy for each interaction.



Table 3: Benefits of CBI

✓ Improves vocabulary retention through creative output
✓ Motivates students
✓ Gives practice making organized, logical arguments
✓ Can be used to prepare for standardized tests
✓ Maintains momentum and student energy in the classroom

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of the scholarship supporting CBI

This article has discussed some of the pedagogical and practical reasons CBI has steadily gained steam over the years and is now being used in EFL classrooms the world over. The CBI classroom allows learners not only to improve their skills in another language but also gives them exposure to and engagement with areas of academic studies in a wide range of fields (McDougald 2016) such as politics, current affairs, science and technology, and art, to name a few. CBI allows students to learn from exposure to and engagement with comprehensible input from sources other than grammar-focused textbook activities according to the communicative approach now nearly universal in second-language classrooms. There may be some focus on form in the course of CBI instruction (Nation 2001; Swain 2005), but it is normally a supplement to address specific, repeated problems or student requests. In addition to providing students with new knowledge, CBI also gives ample opportunities for learners to build fluency (Nation 2001). Finally, as was shown above, students *like* CBI. It motivates them to learn (Sajima 2013). And getting students to learn is of course what educators want above all.

5.2 Research limitations and future challenges

While a large body of scholarship supports the efficacy of CBI, one issue which has not been resolved satisfactorily in the literature is whether CBI seems to work so well because it has been studied mostly in learning environments where students come from educated—even privileged—backgrounds (Bruton 2013). Not enough research has been done on CBI in classrooms composed of learners who have had little formal education or who are of lower socioeconomic status than others who have had more opportunities in life. More

research in this area would help to clarify if the dependent variable of social and educational opportunity is a factor in the efficacy of CBI.

Notes

1. I use the term, *Content-based Instruction* and its easy-off-the tongue acronym, *CBI* instead of the now standard but eminently clunky and forgettable “Content and Language Integrated Learning” and its eminently clunky and forgettable accompanying acronym, *CLIL*.
2. I unapologetically use *they* and *their* as singular gender-neutral pronouns in favor of awkward, clunky, and, as John McWhorter (1998) phrases it, “an ever-clumsier procession of forced alternates, such as the stiff-backed and still sexist *he or she*, the unutterable and hideous *s/he*, [and] the labored alternation of *he* and *she* between sentences.”

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Appendix A

Summary of Steven Pinker's "Why nature & nurture won't go away" that is the source material for the lesson

Steven Pinker on Nature vs. Nurture

Where does personality come from? The debate is an old one and is most often referred to as "nature vs. nurture." In this terminology, those who say that personality mostly comes from genes are said to be on the side of "nature," while those who think that the majority of our personality is formed by our environment are supposed to advocate "nurture" as the source. Those on the side of nurture generally think of the mind as a mostly "blank slate" that is almost empty at birth and then filled by the environment. But Professor Pinker says that scientific advances in the study of "the sciences of mind, brain, genes, and evolution...make the doctrine of the blank slate untenable."



Pinker does not deny the importance of learning, saying, “No one, of course, can deny the importance of learning and culture in all aspects of human life.” He then states, “But cognitive science has shown that there must be complex innate mechanisms for learning and culture to be possible in the first place.” So personality traits are not either 100% nature or 100% nurture, but the result of genes and the environment working together.

Most people’s common sense and intuition, though, says that the majority of our personality comes from nurture. What is some of Professor Pinker’s evidence that a lot of personality comes from genes? First, “studies that measure both genetic and environmental similarity...show numerous main effects of personality, intelligence, and behavior across a range of environmental variation.” In other words, genes have an effect that the environment can almost never totally cancel out.

When it comes to personality traits coming from the environment, most people mean coming from parents’ teaching and behavior towards children. However, Pinker notes:

The conventional wisdom has been that such traits are strongly influenced by parenting practices and role models. But recall that this belief is based on flawed correlational studies that compare parents and children but forget to control for genetic relatedness. Behavioral geneticists have remedied those flaws with studies of twins and adoptees, and have discovered that in fact virtually all behavioral traits are partly (though never completely) heritable.

So most research on personality does not test twins and children who have been adopted. When these are included, that genes have some effect becomes incontrovertible. A vast amount of evidence from a large number of studies shows that identical twins raised in different environments are very similar. Studies also show that siblings raised in different environments are also more similar than random people. So it turns out that family upbringing has almost no lasting effect on personality (except in cases of serious abuse). The evidence for this is that adopted siblings (with the same shared environment at home) are no more similar than random people. Their shared environment has almost no lasting effect on their personalities.

So while parents’ teaching has almost no permanent effect on children’s personalities, *peers* do shape personality. Strong evidence for this is that immigrant children talk and think like their peers—not their parents.

A final factor in the development of personality is chance, random chance. Maybe one child was exposed to more toxins than another. One child was bitten by a dog, another was not. Those unique events also have lasting effects on personality.



So, according to Professor Pinker, personality is not primarily shaped by the environment (especially parents and the home environment), but develops from a combination of genes, the environment of peers and the surrounding culture, and random chance. The commonsense idea that children are a product of their parents' teaching does not stand up to the evidence.