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CONTENT BASED INSTRUCTION: A STRATEGIC DIRECTION IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

ABSTRACT

Content based instruction (CBI) has emerged as an offshoot of the much popularized Communicative Language Teaching. The ideology is based in the precept that language is to be taught primarily for communicative purposes treating language holistically. It emerged from the Canadian Immersion Program and rests on Krashen's *Input hypothesis* and also on Swain's *output hypothesis*. CBI, an instructional practice in second language education promotes the use of subject matter of study for the teaching of language. It has applications of importance primarily in English for Specific Purposes or teaching of communication skills in English for all professional courses at higher education level.

INTRODUCTION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) focused on teaching language holistically in meaningful contexts focusing on generation of language useful for real life in student centered classrooms. This approach emerged as a major shift from the traditionally held views about language teaching where the classroom was largely teacher centered and language was taught in bits and pieces of grammar and vocabulary. CLT viewed language holistically and its teaching as necessarily in terms of equipping students with the four language skills; LSRW. "(It) saw the need to focus language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures" (Richards and Rogers 2001). The aim was to enable the learner to generate language in real life contexts and situations and thereby meaningful presentation of language was emphasized. According to Richards and Rogers (2001) CLT aimed to "make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and to develop procedures for developing the four language skills that acknowledge the

interdependence of language and communication". The goal of 'communicative competence' (Hymes 1972, Halliday 1970, Swain 1985) as essentially much larger than 'linguistic competence" (Chomsky 1965) necessitated meaningful socio-cultural context which employed language in real life like situations. Students learn best by doing and hence, classrooms became student centered where students were not merely passive listeners but were on the center-stage of learning, actively participating in the process of learning. The process became more important hence, than the product.

CLT was hailed as an effective way of teaching language by teachers and researchers but necessitated adaptations in different contexts requiring English for Specific purposes. As learner became the centre, there arose an increasing emphasis on identifying learner needs or the 'needs analysis' which would in turn dictate the curriculum and the syllabus tailor made to the needs of the learners. The professional courses threw up requirement of not merely specific vocabulary or jargons but also different and specific ways of organization of sentences and paragraphs specific to their field.

Of the several off shoots of CLT, one which developed in the last twenty-five years was Content based Instruction focusing on the specific needs of different professionals. It centers on the use of subject matter for the teaching of language; content integrated language instruction.

THEORY OF LANGUAGE

Researchers posit that language is used primarily to convey some meaning or message to the receiver and it has an interactional purpose to serve in the society. The interactive nature of language is thus defined "…Students achieve facility in *using* a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages (that is, messages that contain information of interest to both the speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). This is *interaction."* (Rivers 1987 quoted in Richards and Rogers 2001)

This "Interactional view" of language has been the central idea of the theories of language learning developed after 1980 and has been the mainstay of Communicative approach to language teaching and all associated approaches which are an offshoot of CLT like, CBI.

THEORY OF LANGUAGE LEARNING: KRASHEN'S *INPUT HYPOTHESIS*

Several researches, primarily that of Krashen (1981, 1982, 1985, 2003) and of Swain (1980, 1985, 1993 and 1995), in the Second language acquisition (SLA) stress that best learning takes place when (a) language is presented in a meaningful and useful context to the learner simulative of his/her real life requirement, (b) the level of language presented is slightly above the existing proficiency of the learner and (c) the learner gets sufficient opportunities to engage in a meaningful use of the language to promote its acquisition rather than learning. The idea is that the focus should be on meaning rather than on form. The language should be learnt imperceptibly, without force in such a way that the student attention is not on the process of learning a language but the conveyance of intent. Krashen proposed the *input hypothesis* claiming that learning best takes place when a comprehensible input is presented to the learner.

Language learning is a subconscious process; taking place all the time imperceptibly. Whenever language is encountered (heard or read) language learning takes place without the conscious effort or knowledge of the receiver. Secondly, learning takes place when the language input is substantial and understandable to the receiver. Krashen (1982) proves taking examples of caretaker speech that "Language acquisition is a subconscious process; while it is happening we are not aware that it is happening, and the competence developed this way is stored in the brain subconsciously" (Krashen 1982).

Extending the conditions of input hypothesis, Krashen explores the kind of input that best facilitates learning of a language and he arrives at four prerequisites for optimal input to promote learning; (a) the input has to be comprehensible, (b) it is interesting and/or relevant (c) is not grammatically sequenced and (d) it must be in sufficient quantity.

He showed using a mathematical model how a learner using contextual and extra-linguistic clues is able to interpret the higher level input (he calls it "i+1") if the context is sufficient to interpret the message. "We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is "a little beyond" where we are now… we use more than our linguistic competence to help us understand. We also use context, our knowledge of the world, our extra-linguistic information to help us understand language directed at us." (Krashen 1982) Similarly Swain opines that learning takes place when there is a gap in the existing knowledge and the expected requirement in linguistic domain of the user or learner. Swain connects the two, input and output and makes sense of both by substantiating the learner motivation and role in the process of learning. (Swain 1985)

CONTENT BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI)

CBI is a relatively new approach to teaching language, having started its main sway in late 1980s. It is largely based on a variety of studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and educational and cognitive psychology. Van de Craen and Mondt (2003) defines Content Based Instruction as "A meaning focused learning method...the aim is learning subject matter together with learning a language...". Krahnke (1987) similarly defines CBIL as "Teaching of content/information in language being learnt with little effort to teach the language itself separately from the content being taught". "An approach where teaching of content is integrated with teaching of language" is the way Bentley (2010) defines it.

It is a combination of precepts of the Canadian Immersion Program, English for Specific Purposes as well as the teaching of foreign language programs in Europe (Stroller and Grabe 1997). In the Canadian Immersion Program the students were exposed to or immersed in the target language by being secluded from all possibilities of interacting in any other language but the target one. English for Specific Purposes stresses using specialized vocabulary and structures for the functions served by language in a particular field of study; language focused in one field being vastly different from that focused on in another field.

Content based instruction combines the subject matter of study and the language instruction in English as one unified field. As the name suggests, Content based instruction draws its texts from the subject matter or the content of the discipline the L2 students are studying. Students study English, for example, along with their subject 'Geography' and the vocabulary, grammatical patterns and structures are taught keeping the subject matter of Geography in focus. A text teaching English to a student of Law hence, would be very distinct from the text for a student of Medicine. Duenas points out that "what qualifies as content in CBI, it is very common for it to be some kind of subject matter related to the students' own academic curriculum in primary, secondary or tertiary education" (Duenas 2004:75).

Most of the students in India receive instructions at higher level of education in English medium. They study various subjects related to Engineering, Business Management, Social sciences, Mass communication, Medicine through instruction imparted in English. They require vocabulary specific to their field of study and also the unique sentence patterns to enable them to understand their subject matter. A student studying Law for example, would require to learn words like, *plaintiff, attorney, petition, stay order*, etc. while a student of

Engineering would need words like, *quadrangle, tripod, irreversible, quantum mechanics*, etc. The register of sentence construction in journalism would be like, *the speeding truck crushed five people sleeping on the pavement*; but a medical register would be *multislice CT coronary angiography was performed using volume acquisition, with 0.5mm collimation on a 64 slice MDCT*. The journalistic language uses active voice with subject or the doer of the action highlighted. Medical language on the other hand, uses primarily passive sentence construction where the subject is eliminated. The different fields of study would thus, have to teach the particular sentence constructions used predominantly in that field.

Given below is a worked out example of content based instruction used teaching material where chemistry is the subject matter delivered in and used to teach English.

While learning their subject matter students get exposed to large amount of language. When a student is studying chemistry, for example, it is inevitable that the student encounters words like, *configuration, placement of electrons, shells* and *orbits*, etc. CBI uses this subject for implicit teaching of language while staying focused on the content. The language teaching can thus pay attention to such vocabulary and use this for teaching language.

Further the sentence constructions are like, *The importance of these reactions is **apparent** from the fact that burning of different types of fuels for obtaining energy for domestic, transport and other **commercial** purposes, electrochemical processes for **extraction** of highly reactive metals and non-metals, manufacturing of chemical compounds like caustic soda, operation of dry and wet batteries and **corrosion** of metals fall within the **purview** of redox processes*.

The sentence is very long and achieves cohesion by the use of words like *these*, and the use of parallel grammatical structure like, *burning of,* and *manufacturing of* ; *extraction of*, *operation of* and ***corrosion of***… such structures are very useful in dealing with the subject matters that students handle regularly in their academics as well as in their professional careers. Learners thereby learn to frame complex, nested structures which are still able to convey meaning clearly. This rightly satisfies what Duenas suggests "this incidental language should be comprehensible, linked to their immediate prior learning and relevant to their needs…"

Use of such content also ensures vocabulary expansion. The contextualized presentation facilitates guessing of meaning and establishment of meaning through understanding and

usage in meaningful contexts. While producing language, it becomes easy for the learners to reproduce the words learnt hence and thus facilitates in active vocabulary formation.

The passage makes use more of nouns representing verbs of action 'burn', 'extract', operate', etc. and students' attention can be focused on word formation and word families. This would help him expand his vocabulary, get accustomed to use of words as different parts of speech and achieve greater flexibility in putting to use his active vocabulary.

Further, the language uses the register for the specified field of study. The words and the structures thus learnt can flexibly be carried forward to other contexts of language use. Frequent and regular exposure to such language use affixes the vocabulary and grammatical patterns and facilitates their use in real life situations.

There are also some new words (apparent, reactive, purview, etc.) which can be presented to the students who can guess their meaning from the contextual clues. These words can gradually become part of active vocabulary as students encounter them repeatedly and can learn to use them in contexts other than that of the field of study.

Such an interface can provide extensive opportunities for language learning where the mind is focused on the subject to be taught and the medium of instruction is the target language. Words and phrases contextualized in the subject matter are drawn into focus by setting up activities, tasks and interaction situations and the same is done for the language patterns. Language is taught holistically as the interaction situations present ample opportunities for the use of all the four language skills as well as that of vocabulary and grammar. The language is presented through the subject matter and hence it is contextualized as well as is presented in sufficient quantity, as enumerated by Krashen, enabling the learner to get a substantial exposure to the language. Examples such as above can be easily adapted not only from Chemistry but also from other contents like, Geography, History, Physics, Biology, Economics and Medicine.

Content based instruction provides students contextualized learning and hence the input becomes relevant and meaningful. As the content is interesting and mind engaging to the students, their attention is not focused on learning of language. As Krashen (1982, 1985) says language learning then is a process of implicit acquisition and not explicit learning and students are able to retain such language for longer spans.

Researchers (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991) drawing on their experiments based on theories in Language learning have pointed out that optimal language learning takes place when the "target language is the medium of instruction rather than an object of analysis". As several other researchers (Krashen 1984, Savignon 1983, Dupuy 2000) point out "…a second language is most successfully acquired when the conditions mirror those present in the first language acquisition, that is, when the focus of instruction is on meaning rather than on form; when the language input is at or just above the competence of the student, and when there is sufficient opportunity for students to engage in meaningful use of that language in a relatively anxiety-free environment." (quoted in Duenas, 2004: 76)

ADVANTAGES

Several researchers find CBI a holistic approach to teaching language that emphasizes the communicative functions of language. It is in a way like learning the first language where the attention is not really on language learning rather than on communication of meaning and ideas. There are several advantages highlighted of using CBI.

The most significant is that by receiving content input in the target language students can effectively learn both the content knowledge as well as the language. Grabe and Stroller (1997:107) say that "through content based instruction, learners develop language skills while becoming more knowledgeable citizens of the world".

Further they are constantly exposed to a large amount of language. Whenever this input is higher than their present level of language knowledge, learning inadvertently takes place. Learners imperceptibly learn new words and structures introduced to them without really focusing attention on either. The learning is less memorization based, and more usage related.

Next, language is contextualized as it is linked to their subject knowledge. Therefore it is meaningful and relevant to them and results in purposeful language acquisition. The learners need to deal with similar language on a regular basis hence, reinforcement, revision and repetition ensure strengthening of the language blocks.

Since the content knowledge is graded and is complex, language accordingly, is suited to the requirements of the subjects to be taught. Students build on their prior knowledge of language and are engaged in complex activities related to language use.

Most of the language is generated by students in the content of the subject they learn, hence, they also get sufficient opportunities to create and generate language in meaningful, useful contexts.

CONCLUSION

Content Based Instruction is an offshoot of Communicative approach to language teaching which is built on the interactional view of language. It emphasizes teaching of the target language in contextualized subjects that are taught to the learners as part of their curriculum at all levels of education. Better language learning takes place as the language input presented is of their interest, is meaningful, relevant and useful to their immediate needs and provides opportunities of language generation and use.

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