CONTENT-BASED SYLLABUS

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Abstract
There is growing interest in a model of language education that integrates language ad content instruction in EFL/ESL classroom. The current paper looks at content-based syllabus, with content (subject matter) providing the point of departure for it. Influences leading to the emergence of content-based instruction are discussed, followed by a brief description of the syllabus as well as the relevant frameworks for organizing and integrating. The paper then deals with several rationales for the integration of language and content. Next, some techniques, strategies, and activities used in implementing content-based syllabus are briefly mentioned. It is also suggested that pre-service and in-service teacher education can benefit from a focus on language and content integration. Some advantages and disadvantages of the syllabus are discussed at the end.

Keywords:EFL/ESL classroom, content-based syllabus

Introduction

Although estimates of the number of language minority students in U.S. schools vary, there is consensus that the numbers are rising dramatically. The content syllabus is more common in the USA, where there is a larger proportion of Second Language learners than in UK (Skelton & Willis, n. d.). "Increasingly, the American classroom is multiethnic, multiracial, and multilingual at all levels" (Crandall, 1992, as cited in Crandall, 1994). In response, a number of program models have been developed to meet the needs of language minority students, many involving the integration of language and content instruction. In addition, attention to the lack of foreign language proficiency among Americans has led to the development of a number of foreign language programs that integrate academic content into language instruction. In this approach, the second or foreign language is used as the medium of instruction for mathematics, science, social studies, and other academic subjects; it is the vehicle used for teaching and acquiring subject specific knowledge.

The place of the syllabus

A language teaching syllabus, according to Reilly (n. d.), involves the integration of subject matter (what to talk about) and linguistic matter (how to talk about it); that is, the actual matter that makes up teaching. Choices of syllabi can range from the more or less purely linguistic, where the content of instruction is the grammatical and lexical forms of the language, to the purely semantic or informational, where the content of instruction is some skill or information and only incidentally the form of the language. To design a syllabus is to decide what gets taught and in what order. For this reason, the theory of language explicitly or implicitly underlying the language teaching method will play a major role in determining what syllabus is adopted. Reilly goes on to say that there has been much confusion over the years as to what different types of content are possible in language teaching syllabi and as to

whether the differences are in syllabus or method. Almost all actual language teaching syllabi are combinations of two or more of the types.

Influences leading to Content-based instruction

In the United States, Krashen's theory (Brown, 2000) of second language acquisition has influenced the development of integrated instruction at all levels. Krashen suggests that a second language is most successfully acquired when the conditions are similar to those present in 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 proficiency of the learner; and when there is sufficient opportunity to engage in meaningful use of that language in a relatively anxiety-free environment. This suggests, according to Crandall (1994), that the focus of the second language classroom should be on something meaningful, such as academic content, and that modification of the target language facilitates language acquisition and makes academic content accessible to second language learners.

Crandall goes on referring to Cummins (1981) and Collier (1987) that individuals develop two types of language proficiency: basic interpersonal language skills and cognitive academic language proficiency. He suggests that these two types of proficiency vary according to the degree of context available to the individual and the degree of cognitive challenge of the task. Social language can be acquired in 1 to 2 years, but the level of proficiency needed to read social studies texts or solve mathematics word problems can take 5 to 7 years to develop.

Integrated language and content instruction offers a means by which English as a second language (ESL) students can continue their academic or cognitive development while they are also acquiring academic language proficiency. It also offers a means by which foreign language students can develop fuller proficiency in the foreign language they are studying. In foreign language or two-way bilingual immersion programs, in which a portion of the curriculum is taught through the foreign language, some type of integrated language and content instruction appears to be essential (Crandall, 1994).

Characteristics of content-based syllabus

With content-based instruction, learners are helped to acquire language through the study of a series of relevant topics, each topic exploited in systematic ways and from different angles, as outlined in Mohan's "knowledge framework", (Nunan, 1988 pp. 49-50.) Content syllabuses certainly give learners a lot of exposure to the language, which is good.

The Content-Basics perspective assumes that language learning is a by-product of a focus on meaning—on acquiring some specific topical content. This view has supporters who hold that to teach language as if it were a set of patterns or rules or interactions apart from content is not only misguided, but impossible (Crandall 1997). Citing Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989), Stoller (2002) states:

In a content-based approach, the activities of the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught, and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language. Such an approach lends itself quite naturally to the integrated teaching of the four traditional language skills. For example, it employs authentic reading materials which require students not only to understand information but to interpret and evaluate it as well. It provides a forum in which students can respond orally to reading and lecture materials. It recognizes that academic writing follows from listening and reading, and thus requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing. In this approach, students are exposed to study skills and learn a variety of language skills which prepare them for the range of academic tasks they will encounter (p. 2).

The primary purpose of instruction, according to Reilly (n. d.) and Richards and Rodgers (2001) is to teach some content or information using the language that the students are also learning. The students are simultaneously language students and students of whatever content is being taught. The subject matter is primary, and language learning occurs incidentally to the content learning. The content teaching is not organized around the language teaching, but vice-versa. Content-based language teaching is concerned with information, while task-based language teaching is concerned with communicative and cognitive processes. An example of content-based language teaching is a science class taught in the language the students need or want to learn, possibly with linguistic adjustment to make the science more comprehensible.

Content-based syllabus is yet another realization of the analytic and process approach to syllabus design. It differs from task-based syllabuses in that experiential content, which provides the point of departure for the syllabus, is usually derived from some fairly well-defined subject area such as science or social studies, etc (Nunan, 1988).

In task-based syllabus, the tasks are defined as activities with a purpose other than language learning, but, as in a content-based syllabus, the performance of the tasks is approached in a way that is intended to develop second language ability (Reilly, n. d.).

Rationale for integrating language and content instruction in ESL/EFL classroom

There is growing interest in a model of language education that integrates language and content instruction in the second/foreign language classroom (Snow et al, 1989). Several theoretical rationales underlie this shift in perspective.

In the first place, for young children, cognitive development and language development go hand in hand; language is a tool through which the child comes to understand the world. Language, cognition, and social awareness develop concurrently in young children. Integrated second language instruction seeks to keep these components of development together so that second language learning is an integral part of social and cognitive development in school settings. A second rationale behind integrating language and content teaching is that language is learned most effectively for communication in meaningful, purposeful social and academic contexts. In real life, people use language to talk about what they know and what they want to know more about, not to talk about language itself. The academic content of the school curriculum can provide a meaningful basis for second language learning, given that the content is of interest or value to the learners. Another underlying rationale is that the integration of content with language instruction provides a substantive basis for language teaching and learning. Content can provide both a motivational and a cognitive basis for language learning. Content provides a primary motivational incentive for language learning insofar as it is interesting and of some value to the learner and therefore worth learning. Language then will be learned because it provides access to content, and language learning may even become incidental to learning about the content (e.g., in immersion classes). A fourth rationale concerns the intrinsic characteristics of language variation. It is increasingly recognized that language use in school differs in some important general ways from language use outside of school and, moreover, that different subject areas are characterized by specific genres or registers. Thus, learning the school register or specific subject-area registers may be a prerequisite to mastery of specific content or to academic development in general. This is of particular concern to teachers of limited English proficient (LEP) students (Snow et al, 1989; National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995). Fifthly, the success of immersion as a model of foreign language education has provided strong evidence for the effectiveness of language learning through subject-matter learning. Extensive research has revealed that immersion students learn the academic content specified in the school curriculum and at the same time develop significant levels of foreign language proficiency (Genesee, 1987, as cited

in Snow et al. 1989). Furthermore, concern for the education of language minority students in the United States has prompted a reexamination of the methodologies appropriate for teaching English to LEP students in the public schools. Besides, in context-embedded language tasks, support for meaning is readily available through the immediate communicative situation, whether through background knowledge or through visual or other contextual cues. In contrast, context-reduced tasks offer little available contextual support for the learner to derive meaning from the immediate communicative setting (Cummins, 1981, as cited in Snow et al. 1989).

Frameworks
A Conceptual Framework
    According to the model proposed by Snow et al (1989), language-learning objectives in a content-based program are derived from three sources: (a) the second/foreign language curriculum, (b) the content-area curriculum, and (c) assessment of the learners' academic and communicative needs and ongoing evaluation of their developing language skills. From these sources, two types of language objectives can be specified: content-obligatory language objectives and content-compatible language objectives. Whereas content-obligatory objectives derive directly from the linguistic needs for communicating the information in the content area, content-compatible language objectives derive from the second/foreign language curriculum and ongoing assessment of learner needs and progress. A natural outcome of such activity is cultural learning.

Knowledge framework
    Nunan (1988) mentions Mohan's (1986) framework which can be used for organizing knowledge and learning activities. It consists of a specific and practical side being divided into description, sequence, and choice, as well as a general theoretical side being divided into classification, principles (what principles are there? cause-effect and means-ends and norms etc?), and evaluation (what counts as good or bad?). Nunan mentions two criticisms against the model by Perry (1987): 1) what evidence is there that there are three, and only three, relevant practical knowledge structures? 2) does moving from the practical to the theoretical side suit all learners or do some learn better when they begin from a theoretical base?

Techniques and activities for the implementation of content-based syllabus
    o *There are a variety of strategies and techniques used in content-centered second language instruction:*
Cooperative learning
    In this method, students of different linguistic and educational backgrounds and different skill levels work together on a common task for a common goal in either the language or the content classroom. Cooperative groups encourage students to communicate, to share insights, test hypotheses, and jointly construct knowledge. Depending on their language proficiency, students can be assigned various roles as facilitator, recorder, reporter, or illustrator. Other grouping strategies involve peer tutoring or pairing a second language learner with a more English-proficient peer (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Crandall, 1994).

Task-based or experiential learning
    In this approach, appropriate contexts are provided for developing thinking and study skills as well as language and academic concepts for students of different levels of language proficiency. Students learn by carrying out specific tasks or projects: for example, "doing science" and not just reading about it (Rosebery, Warren, & Conant, 1992, as cited in Crandall, 1994).

Whole language approach

Crandall (1994) referring to the three following studies states that the philosophy of whole language is based on the concept that students need to experience language as an integrated whole. It focuses on the need for an integrated approach to language instruction within a context that is meaningful to students (Goodman, 1986). The approach is consistent with integrated language and content instruction as both emphasize meaningful engagement and authentic language use, and both link oral and written language development (Blanton, 1992). Whole language strategies that have been implemented in content-centered language classes include dialogue journals, reading response journals, learning logs, process-based writing, and language experience stories (Crandall, 1992).

Graphic organizers

These provide a "means for organizing and presenting information so that it can be understood, remembered, and applied". Graphs, realia, tables, maps, flow charts, timelines, and Venn diagrams are used to help students place information in a comprehensible context. They enable students to organize information obtained from written or oral texts, develop reading strategies, increase retention, activate schema as a pre-reading or pre-listening activity, and organize ideas during the prewriting stage (Crandall, 1992, as cited in Crandall, 1994).

Project work

Project work is viewed by most of its advocates "not as a replacement for other teaching methods" but rather as "an approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages and abilities of students" (Haines 1989, p. 1, as cited in Stoller, 2002). Project work is particularly effective because it represents a natural extension of what is already taking place in class. In various forms it shares the following features (Stoller, 2002): a) project work focuses on content learning rather than on specific language targets. Real-world subject matter and topics of interest to students can become central to projects, b) project work is student centered, though the teacher plays a major role in offering support and guidance throughout the process, c) project work is cooperative rather than competitive. Students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to complete a project, sharing resources, ideas, and expertise along the way, d) project work leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks, e) project work culminates in an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, a report, or a stage performance) that can be shared with others, giving the project a real purpose. The value of the project, however, lies not just in the final product but in the process of working towards the end point. Thus, project work has both a process and product orientation, and provides students with opportunities to focus on fluency and accuracy at different project-work stages, and f) project work is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging. It usually results in building student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities.

WebQuests

Marco (2002) has proposed that the Web-Quest can be used in a content-based syllabus for ESP. This activity involves the use of authentic material from different Internet sources and engages students in reading extensively on a topic related to their discipline, performing tasks of increasing complexity, and creating oral or written texts to present the results of their online work.

WebQuests fit well in a learner-centered curriculum that seeks to help students develop autonomous learning. The use of technology with a content-based curriculum results in a learning environment in which students take more control of their learning. The role of the teacher is not to transmit knowledge, but to provide resources, help students develop learning strategies, guide the learning process, and offer support throughout the process. The use of WebQuests to learn languages integrates the pedagogical benefits of project work, content-based instruction, and language learning via the Internet. ESP students become more motivated because they are using new technologies and authentic texts to complete authentic tasks related to their disciplines.

The WebQuest is an activity that can be fruitfully exploited in ESP. It helps students develop academic skills such as scanning, skimming, paraphrasing, summarising, organising, analysing, and problem solving. Through extensive reading students acquire the vocabulary related to a topic of their discipline. By using authentic texts to perform real world tasks students become aware of concepts such as purpose and audience and see the utility of studying a second or foreign language (Marco, 2002).

Implications for teacher education

Teacher development in integrated instruction usually begins when one English language teacher seeks out one content-area teacher to discuss the language learning needs or academic language problems of shared students (Short, Crandall, & Christian, 1989, as cited in Crandall, 1998). The teachers' discussion may lead to a number of very productive collaborative strategies, benefiting both the students and the teachers. These include 1) analysis of texts, materials, and curriculum; 2) classroom observation, reflection, and feedback; 3) collaborative action research and reflection; 4) development of integrated or complementary lessons, materials, or curricula; 5) collaborative or team teaching; and 6) collaborative university courses for preservice and inservice teacher education (Crandall, 1998).

As linguistic and cultural diversity and the role of English in some aspect of education or professional preparation increase, it is vital that some attention to integrating language and content instruction be a focus of both preservice and inservice teacher education. At a minimum, the program or education should foster (Crandall, 1998):

1. basic understanding of the developmental nature of second language acquisition and of errors as a sign of learning;
2. understanding of the nature of academic language and skills and helping students to develop this through content study;
3. strategies for accommodating different levels of English language proficiency in the classroom without "watering down" the curriculum by providing multiple opportunities, repetition or rephrasing, learner-centered approaches, demonstrations, etc.
4. an understanding of differences in cross-cultural communication; and
5. strategies for assessment and evaluation, including portfolios, checklists and inventories, and other accommodations, such as the use of the primary language.

This content could be most effectively delivered in a teacher education program that brings together prospective and experienced teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and even students using some of the strategies described above. In fact, if teacher education is to be a seamless process of lifelong learning, then preservice and inservice teacher education needs to be better integrated from the outset (Crandall, 1998).

Issues facing content-based language instruction

Among the issues facing content-centered language instruction in the United States is the need for research to evaluate the effectiveness of integrated instruction, specifying optimal conditions for various programmatic effects, including the timing of integrated instruction, the relative effectiveness of different program models, and the use of various instructional strategies, texts, and assessment measures. Teacher training is another concern as the number of second language learners in U.S. classrooms increases. Proportionately the increase is observed in other parts of the world. To accommodate this diverse student population, content-area teachers need to know how to shelter their instruction, and language teachers need to learn how to integrate academic language and content better in their classrooms (Crandall, 1992, as cited in Crandall, 1994).

Demerits or criticisms

Content-based instruction has not adequately addressed two key questions, which future ELT teachers must address. These questions are "What content?" and "How much content?" A late 20th century maxim of language teaching has been "Don't teach about language, teach language." Content-based instruction proponents say, "Don't teach a second language, teach content in a second language." But language appears to be the natural content for language teachers to teach. If we are not to teach about language (e.g., grammar), but are to teach content about something, what is the "about something" that we are supposed to teach? In most academic situations, language teachers are neither invited nor equipped to use a second language to teach mathematics, science, history, physical education, or other traditional academic content areas. Some teach, in a second language, content, such as astrology that does not compete with the academic curriculum. This brings its own set of problems. If content is inherent in language use, and if content-based approaches to language learning and teaching seem to promise more effective routes to second language mastery, then we must ask ourselves what content is best for the language class. The natural content for language people is language itself and literature. We are beginning to see a resurgence of interest in literature and in the topic of language as "the basic human technology," as sources of content in language teaching. More such attention will develop in the future. The second question is "How much content?". As in other ELT matters, there is often a polar, all-or-nothing approach to content-based approaches. Often there is a hidden assumption that language learning gains are only appreciable when content blocks comprise entire courses or blocks of courses, as in immersion or sheltered immersion teaching. However, much shorter blocks of interesting, meaning-structured units are also highly productive in language learning (Rodgers, 2000).

But is it sufficient to produce a syllabus that is merely a list of topics ? How will teachers know which particular items of language to focus on more closely? Which items will, in the long run, be of more use to the learner? Or are Mohan and others like him who design content-based "immersion programmes", relying, like Prabhu (1986, as cited in Skelton & Willis, n. d.), entirely on natural acquisition happening, with no overt focus on language form? And if so, how do we ensure that the topics and texts chosen will give a sufficiently balanced exposure to the language that is representative of the target situation? This question is a vital one, and relates closely to the concept of linguistic coverage. How can adequate and balanced coverage be assured? The syllabus designer must, in all fairness, produce a syllabus that is accountable to sponsors, testers, future employers, and of course the learners themselves. Here we have another key concept - that of accountability (Skelton & Willis, n. d.). Skelton and Willis (n. d.) state that the problem of checking that the learners each receive an adequately balanced exposure to the language of their target discourse

community is indeed a difficult one. And of course drawing up a standardised test that will be fair to all students is another.

"It is unlikely that desired levels of second/foreign language proficiency will emerge simply from the teaching of content through a second or foreign language." (Snow et al. 1989, p. 204). Criticizing skills-based syllabus, they also go on saying that after all, in order to infer meaning from context, or to understand discourse signals and clause relations, there are linguistic operations to be made, and words to be learnt, not just skills to be performed. This holds as much true for content-based syllabus as well. Furthermore, they observe that what matters is that if we attempt a syllabus specification which is other than narrowly linguistic we open up the possibility of including an open-ended set of indefinite words to describe our wishes. And we trail this indefinable baggage along with the words that we put on the page.

The solution to the shortcomings in immersion students' productive skills seems to lie in the use of methodologies that apply techniques to practice language forms with a communicative approach. "Such tasks and activities will meet the same criteria as is demanded of the communicative teaching of grammar: purposefulness, interactivity, creativity, and unpredictability" (Clipperton, 1994, p. 746, as cited in National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995).

Merits

By selecting subject areas, the syllabus is given a logic and coherence which might be missing from analytic syllabuses which are little more than a random collection of tasks. In addition, the logic of the subject may provide a non-linguistic rationale for selecting and grading (Nunan, 1988).

Mohan (1979) argues for content-based syllabuses on the grounds that they facilitate learning not merely *through* language but *with* language to which Nunan (1988) also refers, while citing Mohan (1986):

We cannot achieve this goal if we assume that language learning and subject matter learning are totally separate and unrelated operations (p. 49).

Marco (2002) cites at least two major benefits of content-based instruction from two studies. First, if students are given multiple opportunities to interact with authentic, meaningful, and challenging material, the result is better learning (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 1989; Kasper, 2000). Second, students' motivation is enhanced with the use of authentic materials relevant to their goals (Chavez, 1998).

Since the main objective of an ESP course is to help students acquire the linguistic and communicative skills related to their disciplines, a content-based approach is especially useful. Content-based pedagogy promotes synthesizing and evaluating, and helps students improve their academic skills by raising their awareness of the concepts of audience and purpose (Kasper, 2000, as cited in Nunan, 1988).

As cited in Stoller (2002), four findings from research in educational and cognitive psychology that emphasize the benefits of content-based instruction are noteworthy: a) thematically organized materials, typical of content-based classrooms, are easier to remember and learn (Singer 1990), b) the presentation of coherent and meaningful information, characteristic of well-organized content-based curricula, leads to deeper processing and better learning (Anderson 1990), c) there is a relationship between student motivation and student interest -common outcomes of content-based classes- and a student's ability to process challenging materials, recall information, and elaborate (Alexander, Kulikowich, and Jetton 1994), d) expertise in a topic develops when learners reinvest their knowledge in a sequence of progressively more complex tasks (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993), feasible in content-based classrooms and usually absent from more traditional language classrooms because of

the narrow focus on language rules or limited time on superficially developed and disparate topics (e.g., a curriculum based on a short reading passage on the skyscrapers of New York, followed by a passage on the history of bubble gum, later followed by an essay on the volcanoes of the American Northwest).

Evaluations of a variety of immersion programs suggest at least three elements of general relevance for second language instruction: 1) instructional approaches that integrate content and language are likely to be more effective than approaches in which language is taught in isolation; 2) an activity-centered approach that creates opportunities for extended student discourse is likely to be beneficial for second language learning; and 3) language objectives should be systematically targeted along with academic objectives in order to maximize language learning (National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, 1995).

Skelton and Willis (n. d.), talking of notional-functional syllabus, observe that this type of syllabus has 'high surrender value' in that even if you leave the course after one year, or even one term, you can still use what you have learnt in practical situations. The researcher believes that content-based syllabus takes sides with notional-functional syllabus in this regard, that is, CBI has high surrender value.

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