

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CONTENT BASED INSTRUCTION IN EFL CONTEXTS

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### ABSTRACT

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is a context where language and content are taught simultaneously. It is closely linked with the cognitive approach to teaching foreign languages as the language is taught through meaning or in a meaningful context. The current article investigates the definitions of CBI provided by different authors. In addition, it discusses the features of this approach as well as its benefits in EFL classroom settings.

**Key words:** CBI, cognitive, meaningful, content knowledge.

CBI is defined as “the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills” (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003, p. 2). By providing students with authentic, meaningful academic contexts, it aims to develop both the students’ language and their content knowledge. In addition, some authors include the development of academic learning skills as one of the aims of CBI (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994). In CBI, language is not merely the object of learning, but also the means for negotiating meaning, organizing information, and acquiring content knowledge.

CBI has been supported by a number of theories in second language acquisition. In CBI, students have the opportunity to be exposed to meaningful and comprehensive input in context, which is considered an important element for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). CBI also provides students with opportunities to negotiate meaning and to exercise productive language skills through which they also can pay attention to forms as well as meaning.

The cognitive skills and learning strategies that are incorporated into CBI are also supported by a number of educational and cognitive theories in principle. In CBI, teachers are asked to provide students with meaningful and coherent information through various kinds of instructional strategies such as visual aids, conceptual maps, and analogies. By doing so, CBI should help students connect new knowledge with their existing knowledge and schemata, thus enhancing their learning. CBI facilitates

students' higher-order thinking skills and motivation by providing them with cognitively challenging content materials and tasks.

Moreover, CBI tries to develop both the students' language and their content knowledge through providing them with authentic, meaningful academic contexts. It also claims that the acquisition of language is most effective when the conditions of acquisition are analogous to those of first language acquisition ( Savignon 1983;).

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 leads itself quite naturally to the integrated teaching of the four traditional language skills. For example, it employs authentic reading materials that 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 that prepare them for the range of academic tasks they will encounter.

These practical considerations lead to the seven strong rationales for CBI according to Grabe and Stoller (1997):

1. In content-based classrooms, students are exposed to a considerable amount of language while learning content. This incidental language should be comprehensible, linked to their immediate prior learning, and relevant to their needs--all important criteria for successful language learning. Such a setting for learning makes second language learning consistent with most other academic learning contexts as well; that is, most classrooms involve the teaching of some type of content information, and, in those classrooms, language learning also occurs--- at least incidentally. In content-based classrooms, teachers and students explore interesting content while students are engaged in appropriate language-dependent activities, reflecting the learning that students carry out in other content-area classes. The resultant language learning activities, therefore, are not artificial or meaningless exercises.

2. CBI supports contextualized learning; students are taught useful language that is embedded within relevant discourse contexts rather than as isolated language fragments. In content-based classrooms, students have many opportunities to attend to language, to use language, and to negotiate content through language in natural discourse contexts. Thus, CBI allows for explicit language instruction, integrated with content instruction, in a relevant and purposeful context.

3. Students in CBI classes have increased opportunities to use the content knowledge and expertise that they bring to class. The use of coherently developed content resources allows students to call on their own prior knowledge to learn additional language and content material.

4. CBI itself promises to generate increased motivation among students; in Content-based classrooms, students are exposed to complex information and are involved in demanding activities which can lead to intrinsic motivation. Motivation and interest arise partly from the recognition that learning is occurring and that it is worth the effort, and partly from the appropriate matching of increasing student knowledge of a topic with increasing task (or learning) challenges.

5. CBI supports, in a natural way, such learning approaches as - cooperative learning, apprenticeship learning, experiential learning, and project-based learning. It also lends itself well to strategy instruction and practice, as theme units naturally require and recycle important strategies across varying content and learning tasks.

6. CBI allows greater flexibility and adaptability to be built into the curriculum and activity sequences. Because additional subtopics and issues can be incorporated into the course, teachers have many opportunities to adjust the class to complement the interests and needs of both teacher and student.

7. CBI lends itself to student-centered classroom activities; in Content-based classrooms, students have opportunities to exercise choices and preferences in terms of specific content and learning activities. Because there are many avenues for exploring themes and topics in content-based classes, student involvement in topic and activity selection is increased.

In sum, CBI aims to promote integrated development of students' language competence and content knowledge, and it has been supported by a number of theories from different academic disciplines.

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