



**INTEGRATING CONTENT BASED INSTRUCTION IN FOUNDATION
PROGRAMME**



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Research Paper :

Introduction :

Integrating content based (CBI) instruction in the foundation programme is a challenging task because the foundation programme is essentially a skill-oriented course intended to develop the language skills of students who are planning to go for professional studies. Therefore, this study takes into account the theoretical foundations and practical implications of content based instruction in a skill development course as opposed to a university course in which CBI is more often implemented. In short, this study is a proposal to implement CBI in the teaching methodology of the foundation programme implemented by the Ministry of Health, Oman. The foundation programme consists of English, Information Technology and mathematics.

The scope of this study is limited to English language which is the chief component of the Foundation Programme. A critical analysis of this component gives rise to the proposal of integrating CBI into the English curriculum of the foundation program. The effectiveness of this proposal can be ascertained only by comparing it with the existing curriculum and by analyzing the effects of the actual implementation of the proposed modified curriculum. Since this study remains at the level of a proposal to be implemented, it doesn't satisfy the usual parameters of scientific research where data is collected and analysed in order to validate the findings. The strength of this study lies in the fact that it is the logical outcome of combining a past experience with a present reality. Furthermore, it challenges the existing system and methodology of teaching by opening up new avenues for exploration in the territory of higher education.

Content-based language instruction has become increasingly popular these days as a means of developing linguistic ability and acquiring proficiency in a second or foreign language. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the basic postulates and essential characteristics of Content-based language instruction, popularly known as CBI. This new methodology of language instruction prepares the students to acquire language within the context of a specific academic subject instead of learning language in isolation or out of context. In other words it is a method of teaching language through the medium of an academic subject rather than teaching language directly in a descriptive manner within the framework of grammatical rules. According to Davis (2003) "Content-based instruction (CBI) is learning about something rather than learning about language." He further says that it is not a new concept but there has been an increased interest in this field over the past ten years, particularly in the USA and Canada where it has proven very effective in ESL immersion programmes.

This new methodology gained popularity when the centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA), University of Minnesota launched the Content-based Language Teaching through Technology (CoBaLTT) initiative in 1999. The aim of the programme was to create a resource centre to meet the growing need for materials and training to change the focus of language instruction from grammar to meaningful communication. To achieve that goal, second language instruction should prepare students to use their skills in demanding, real-world situations. Teaching them to talk about a language, describe its grammar and conjugate verbs in sterile, clinical isolation from a broader cultural context will not serve that goal. Students must be able to participate in culturally appropriate ways in interaction with members of other cultures. They must be able to interpret and understand the nuances of concepts, ideas and opinions as they are expressed through media and literatures (National Standards for Foreign Language Education, 1996). In short, the primary aim of CBI is to equip students to use language correctly and communicate confidently in real life situations.

The approach of content-based instruction can be defined as "...the integration of particular content with language teaching aims" (Brinton et al.,

1989). It is based on the principle that successful language learning occurs when students are presented with target language material in meaningful, contextualized forms with primary focus on acquiring information and knowledge. As a result, content is the organizing principle and other aspects of language such as linguistic structures, vocabulary and grammatical functions are presented as and when needed. Hence the professed aim of CBI is to prepare students to acquire language from the learning context itself through the application of naturally occurring mental skills of perception, analysis and integration. Therefore, it is basically a learner-centered teaching methodology as Krashen (1981) points out: "...language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive'... language acquisition does not require conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill" According to Richards & Rogers (2001) Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information rather than around its linguistic features.

The success of CBI depends on dynamic teachers and enthusiastic learners. In addition, authentic materials should be identified and utilized. In short, CBI is based on the fact that learners are expected to acquire language from the learning context itself through the application of naturally occurring mental skills of perception, analysis and integration. In this sense, this methodology is a significant departure from the traditional method of language instruction where the teacher input is crucial in the learning process. It is this learner-centered approach or the 'focus on learner' that accounts for the huge success and increasing popularity of Content-based language Instruction (CBI) world-wide.

Content-based language instruction is very effective in the development of the learner's speaking and listening skills because language is acquired from authentic discourse in real life situations. The authenticity of the content or the study material contributes directly in the development of the learner's reading skill or the power of comprehension. In spite of the popularity and success of this innovative learning methodology, a critical analysis is necessary to ascertain its efficacy with regard to the skills of expression such as writing and speaking skills. Unlike the skills of comprehension, the writing skill requires competence in grammar and a high level of language awareness. Can the learner achieve this competence without specific and direct input from the teacher? What is the role of grammar in CBI? Can a learner achieve the desired level of writing skill from the content-based materials alone? These are some of the issues discussed in this paper. In order to deal with them meaningfully, it is necessary to present a brief analysis of the methodology of content-based language instruction (CBI). There are three different models of CBI which are classified as the sheltered model, the adjunct model and the theme based model. Among them the theme-based model is the most popular among educators.

The Sheltered Model

Sheltered CBI is called "sheltered" because learners are given special assistance to help them understand regular classes. Two teachers can work

together to give instruction in a specific subject. One of the teachers is a content specialist and the other an ESL specialist. They may teach the class together or the class time may be divided between the two of them. For example, the content specialist will give a short lecture and then the English teacher will check if the students have understood the important words by reviewing them later.

The Adjunct Model

Adjunct classes are usually taught by ESL teachers. The aim of these classes is to prepare students for "mainstream" classes where they will join English L1 learners. Adjunct classes may resemble EAP or ESP classes where emphasis is placed on acquiring specific target vocabulary; they may also feature study skills sessions to familiarize the students with listening, note taking and skimming and scanning texts. Some adjunct classes are taught during the summer months before regular college classes begin, while others run concurrently with regular lessons.

The Theme Based Model

Theme based CBI is the most common method and is usually found in EFL contexts. Theme based CBI can be taught by an EFL teacher or as a team in coordination with a content specialist. The teacher(s) can create a course of study designed to unlock and build on their own students' interests. The course content can be chosen from an enormous number of diverse topics. According to Teresa Alejos Juez (2006) CBI bases its rationale on the premise that language must be used as a medium for learning content, and content as a resource for learning language. In that sense, it aims at eliminating the artificial separation or dualism between language instruction and subject matter classes that exists in most educational settings. Furthermore, the fundamental organization of the curriculum derives from the subject matter, rather than from the forms, functions or situations. In other words, during content-based instruction attention is shifted from learning language *per se* to learning language through a relevant learning context. In this process, communicative competence is achieved in the act of learning specific topics such as law, business, nursing or economics. The chief benefits of theme-based CBI are considered to be the following.

- CBI supports contextualized learning where students are taught useful language embedded with relevant discourse contexts.
- CBI allows students to progress through content areas while continuing to acquiring language skills.
- CBI emphasizes a connection to real life and real world skills.
- CBI incorporates a higher number of communicative skills and lends itself to student-centred classroom activities.
- CBI allows for greater flexibility to be built into the curriculum and activities

Since learners are exposed to a considerable amount of language through stimulating content, they explore interesting content through appropriate language-dependent activities. Furthermore, CBI delivers complex information through real life context for the students to grasp the information in the most appropriate manner which ultimately leads to intrinsic motivation.

Finally, contextualized learning helps students to make greater connections with the language & what they already know. As a result, students will develop the following language skills automatically.

- predicting using previous knowledge as well as visual or textual clues
- observing, comparing, contrasting and classifying
- sequencing and prioritising information
- recording and interpreting information
- hypothesising and raising questions
- understanding cause and effect and making inferences

Comparison to other approaches

The CBI approach is similar to the approach seen in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which are commonly employed for vocational or occupational needs. The sheltered and Adjunct models of CBI prepare students to acquire language within the context of a specific academic subject as in ESP or EAP. The Adjunct and Sheltered models of instruction are essentially a teacher-driven approach that puts the responsibility on the teachers. As a result, teachers need to have knowledge of the subject matter, knowledge of instructional strategies, knowledge of L2 learning processes and the ability to assess cognitive, linguistic and social strategies that students employ for content comprehension. It is basically a teacher-centered approach. While theme based method in CBI promotes a student-centered approach that emphasizes student involvement and the role of the learner in the process of learning. In such classrooms, students learn through active participation and involvement in the learning process. They do not depend on the teacher to direct all learning or to be the source of all information. Central to CBI is the belief that learning occurs not only through exposure to the teacher's input, but also through active, social roles in the classroom that involve interactive learning. Theme-based language instruction is the most widespread of the three content-based models because it can be implemented within virtually any existing institutional setting, and the theme or the topic can be selected to match students' interests. As a result, it is the theme based model which has proved most effective and successful over the past decade. Incorporating CBI into foundation curriculum is a way of providing a meaningful context for language instruction and learning with higher order thinking skills. At the same time, theme-based CBI offers a vehicle for reinforcing academic skills for both learners and teachers. Therefore, it is suited for implementation in the foundation programme conducted by the Ministry of Health, Oman. Moreover, theme-based language instruction specifically applicable for nursing students can be incorporated easily into the curriculum of the Foundation programme.

Theoretical foundations of CBI

According to Davies (2003) CBI is based on three main theories of language: Firstly, language is text and discourse based and the focus of language acquisition is on meaning rather than form. Secondly, language use draws on integrated skills. Finally, language is purposeful. The three dimensional focus of the CBI helps ESL/EFL students to perceive meaningful connection with life

and reality in the context of a second language. Moreover, it offers them an opportunity to integrate their skills effectively to acquire language from authentic sources along with the knowledge of the academic culture. The theoretical foundation of CBI is based on the fact that learning occurs not only through exposure to the teacher's input, but also through active, social roles in the classroom that facilitate interactive learning. In addition, a clear understanding of the target language, its ethnicity and social identity are integral to second language acquisition (Franson & Holliday, 2009). Since theme-based CBI promotes integration of skills, language learning becomes a composite procedure where the mental faculties of a learner naturally undergo a proactive transformation oriented towards internalizing the nuances of a second language. Therefore, theme-based CBI lays solid foundation for the acquisition of a second language from authentic texts and discourses.

Grammar is the most important element of a second language as far as a learner is concerned. His/her constant endeavour is to speak and write the language with accuracy or correct grammar. In this context, it is necessary to formulate a clear concept about the definition of grammar. Diane Musumeci (1997) says that today many teachers and learners believe that grammar is only a set of rules that govern language, primarily its morphology and syntax. On the other hand, Linguists define grammar as a set of components: phonetics (the production and perception of sounds), phonology (how sounds are combined), morphology (the study of forms, or how elements are combined to create words), syntax (how words are strung together into sentences), and semantics or meaning. Because all languages are characterized by these components, by definition, language does not exist without grammar. The emergence of content-based language learning gave rise to a dual tradition in second language teaching: namely, a theoretical stance that views language above all as a rich and complex system of human communication that is best acquired through meaningful interaction with interesting content as opposed to a pedagogical practice that insists on accuracy, explicit instruction in rules, and rote learning of grammatical forms. The holistic view that grammar is inseparable from language gives rise to the idea that the best method of teaching language is through content because it takes care of the functions of language in addition to the primary purpose of meaningful communication.

Practical implications of CBI

Since content-based language learning ignores explicit grammar instruction, it is necessary to examine different ways of incorporating meaningful grammar instruction in theme-based CBI to make it more effective. In this context, the suggestion of (Elles, 1990) is significant. He suggests that the main mechanism by which formal instruction works is by developing explicit knowledge of grammatical features, which, subsequently, helps learners to acquire implicit knowledge. He also argues that explicit knowledge contributes to L2 acquisition in two major ways. First, knowing about a grammatical feature makes the learner more likely to notice that feature in input and to acquire it as implicit knowledge. Second, explicit knowledge

can be used to construct planned utterances and to monitor utterances before they are made. Therefore, the most effective ways of learning a language is to adopt a task-based approach to understand its grammar. According to Long (1989), there are four kinds of effective tasks, planned tasks, closed tasks, convergent tasks and two-way tasks. In two-way tasks, the exchange of meaning is obligatory and they produce more negotiation of meaning than one-way tasks. In planned tasks, the learners prepare their speech or think about what they will say beforehand. In this task, learners are more likely to be encouraged to do negotiation than unplanned tasks. In closed tasks, there is a definite solution or ending and they produce more negotiation than open tasks with no clear resolution. In convergent tasks, where the participants must agree on a solution, more negotiation is promoted than divergent tasks, where different views are permitted. In short, content-based language teaching through grammar tasks has two fold benefits. Firstly, it develops explicit knowledge of L2 grammatical features and secondly, it promotes communicative skills through the content material. Grammar tasks should be aimed at raising the learner's consciousness about the grammatical properties of the L2 and the content material should aim at promoting communicative competence. In order to achieve this twofold aim, it is extremely important to choose relevant and interesting topics. Such topics should be consciously designed to meet the academic as well as the language needs of the learners.

The Proposed Model

In order to realize this objective, English curriculum of the foundation studies in the nursing institutes under the ministry of health can be taken as a specific case. Instead of teaching grammar material from a general grammar book, the topics for language instruction should be taken from the work environment or the field of activity of a nurse. The subject matter should be about the hospital environment in general and about the functioning of different departments as well as the duties of doctors, nurses and other staff who work in the hospital. The teaching materials can also include episodes of accidents, the functioning of emergency department and the procedure of hospital admissions in an interesting manner. A whole range of grammar topics can be taught through the medium of authentic texts created from real life situations related a hospital. Tenses, passives, reported speech, question forms etc. can be taught interestingly as end of lesson exercises in reading passages designed for reading comprehension. For example, a nurse has to record the details of patient care in the medical records. To do so she needs to know how to use passive sentences. This can be easily incorporated into the reading text about nursing care which is a common routine in a hospital.

The patient was given bath at 9 a.m.

His temperature was taken at 10 a.m.

She has to use reported speech to give information to the doctor

The patient complained of chest pain last night.

He wanted to know if he could take painkillers.

When a patient is admitted, the nurse has to ask questions (Wh, yes/no) to record relevant information in the medical records.

What is your name?

Have you been taking any medication?

The above examples are illustrated to show that the most effective way of teaching grammar is to incorporate them into content based materials related to the ESL/EFL academic context relevant to the learner. Grammar lessons can be included in an interesting manner in content materials designed for reading comprehension. Grammar exercises can be done as answers to comprehension questions as illustrated above. Teaching grammar through CBI is motivating and challenging for the students because motivation is provided by the content material and challenge of comprehension is posed to the students through (WH) questions. After completing these two stages, the students can be initiated into the instruction of grammar rules from the context of the reading passage. Incorporating task-based activities mentioned above are taken from a hospital environment. Such grammar lessons are very useful in the initial stages of the foundation programme. This is due to the fact that the material used for teaching grammar is taken from authentic situations in a hospital. Moreover, the grammar is taught through content materials which are highly beneficial for the students of Ministry of Health as they have to work in a hospital environment in future.

Modification of IELTS Reading and Listening Component

The IELTS examination is the culmination of foundation studies and students need to score the required band in order to join the nursing programme conducted by Ministry of Health, Oman. The textbooks which are presently used for the IELTS course can be replaced with authentic texts from medical related topics from hospital environment. The restructuring of the syllabus for IELTS course books should be designed by keeping in mind the future requirements of the nursing students. The modified learning material will be highly beneficial to the students because it is relevant to their future studies. Moreover, it can promote all the four language skills in the learner in an effective manner. Reading and listening materials should be taken up first because they are both skills of comprehension which are basically an activity of the mind. Once a learner comprehends a reading passage from a medical related field, he will not find it difficult to comprehend a general passage which does not employ specialized vocabulary. Similarly, if student can comprehend a specialized medical discussion, he will not find a discussion on general topics incomprehensible. Therefore, the proposal of this study is to recommend the restructuring of the reading and listening components of IELTS for the foundation students of the Ministry of Health.

There are multiple benefits for incorporating medical related topics for reading skills. First of all, the students will learn specialised vocabulary in order to answer the comprehension questions. Since the reading passages deal with relevant specialisations of the students in future studies, there is a motivation factor for learning additional vocabulary. The argument that learning specialized text for IELTS reading component can affect their

performance in the IELTS official test is unsustainable because a student who can master specialized vocabulary will easily comprehend vocabulary usually found in general reading passages. In addition, it can address the current problem of difficulty in comprehending medical textbooks by the students of Ministry of Health who are undergoing various diploma programmes in health related specialities. Since all the students in the foundation programme conducted by Ministry of Health are required to choose various specialities related to health and hospital environment the modified IELTS component will be extremely useful to them in their future studies.

Another IELTS component which can be re-structured for Ministry of Health students is the listening component. Since listening is a skill of comprehension, if a learner is trained to comprehend specialised discourses from medical field such as the conversation between two doctors or between a doctor and a patient, he/she would not find it difficult to comprehend a discourse of general nature. Since there are four different types of listening activities, incorporating medical related conversations can be integrated into the curriculum taking into account the level and requirement of the learners. The first two sections of the listening component can be kept unchanged as they deal with conversations from everyday life situations. The last two sections deal with conversation between two or more speakers. In these sections medical topics can be incorporated effectively to supplement future academic needs of the students. Since writing and speaking are skills of expression, they have wider context and more general applications. Therefore, the entire proposal is confined only to the restructuring of reading and listening skills. This is based on the fact that these two skills primarily deal with the development of comprehension and thinking skills which are undoubtedly superior to other mental activities. Once learners train themselves to comprehend difficult medical topics through the practise of reading and listening skills, they will be able to perform similar skills without difficulty from topics of general nature.

A student is considered to have completed his/her foundation studies only when that student achieves the required band for his/her IELTS examination. It is a necessary pre-condition for him/her to join for any course in higher studies. Since all the students in the foundation programme conducted by Ministry of Health are required to take up various specialities in health related field, the Health Ministry can re-structure their IELTS curriculum in the model provided in this proposal to suit the future requirements of their students. As all these students will be working in the different departments of a hospital in future, the modified syllabus of IELTS will have direct applications in their life and future career. Under these circumstances, it is extremely beneficial for these students to study authentic textbooks related to hospital environment as well as patient related topics. The functioning of different departments and the routine of a hospital can also be included as topics in the IELTS text books. The textbooks should be designed to suit the level of the students keeping in mind the band requirement of IELTS examination conducted by various agencies.

Conclusion

The above proposal may look absurd on the ground that IELTS is a proven international language testing system which ensures that an EFL/ESL student who wants to go for higher studies in a university or tertiary institution achieves a certain level of proficiency in English. Moreover, the traditional IELTS textbooks include materials from different subject areas and the emphasis is always on general, common and interesting topics. It can be proved that replacing them with medical related topics can only enhance the motivation of students of Ministry of Health because the content is related to the learners' future career and the topics are taken from real life situations which they experience every day. The best method of ensuring the international standard of the students is to subject them to the traditional IELTS test in order to validate the effectiveness of the modified syllabus. The traditional IELTS textbooks for teaching the four skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking are taken from diverse fields which are totally unrelated to the future professional needs of the students. The justification for the selection of such text books may be based on the fact that the aim of IELTS is not to teach any subject through a second language but to teach the general language skills necessary for their academic and social needs in the learning environment.

The above argument is highly useful in a General Foundation Programme of a university where students opt for diverse subjects for their higher studies. In the context of students opting for nursing and allied health sciences, it is necessary to modify the IELTS text books with topic taken from medical and hospital environment. Since this study is a proposal to be implemented, it needs a pilot study to determine the actual outcome of this proposal. However, the proposal is based on the solid theoretical foundations of the effectiveness of theme-based CBI. It has been proved in several research contexts that content based language instruction is better than the traditional language instruction. Therefore, this proposal is designed on the theoretical foundation that grammar is inseparable from language and the best method of teaching language is through content because it takes care of the functions of language in addition to the primary purpose of meaningful communication in the EFL/ESL context.

Since the study remains at the level of a proposal, the usual parameters of scientific research cannot be applied in this context as there is no scope for data collection or for a critical analysis of the result showing the effectiveness of the programme. However, it opens up new avenues for challenging experimentation in the field of higher education. In addition, as Romova (2011) says theme-based CBI is a motivating and anxiety-lowering teaching model. It increases learner motivation because students are not studying language in isolation but they study authentic content materials relevant to their future which make learning more meaningful and purposeful. Her study further establishes the fact that rich language context provided by CBI reading and listening materials offer potential for effective grammar instruction. Therefore, it can be concluded that integration of content based

instruction in Foundation Programme is the best and most effective method of second language instruction.

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