Content-based language teaching: a way to keep students motivated and challenged?

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What is content-based language teaching?

Content-based language teaching is a version of bilingual education and subject-teaching which simultaneously teaches the language required for school learning and promotes thinking skills. In Europe it is referred to as CLIL - content and language integrated learning; in other areas it may be referred to as language across the curriculum or cross-curricular language learning. In 1995 CLIL was given official sanction by the European Commission, whose White Paper Teaching and learning. Towards the learning society (1995) is part of European Union policy on multilingualism. Now, countries such as Czechoslovakia, Finland, France, Holland, Spain and Switzerland are part of this growing movement, thus providing a springboard for innovative pedagogy as teachers attempt to understand and develop the principles and practice for linking English language learning with the curriculum.

According to Savignon, (1991) ‘Content-based courses …of language instruction are a natural concomitant of communicative approaches to foreign language instruction that emphasise the use of language to interpret, express and negotiate meaning’. (cited in Met, 1998:36). This kind of focus has much in common with teaching English as an additional language (EAL) for learners who attend school in English-speaking countries. Indeed, the first 12 years of my experience with teacher education for CLIL was in an EAL context; thereafter I have found many aspects of this approach transferable to ELT settings (see Brewster 1990, 1992, 1997, 1999)

The rationale for CLIL

Marsh and Lange (1999) highlight linguistic, educational and societal reasons for using CLIL, writing, ‘The fact that CLIL offers the opportunity to use language ‘as a tool’ for L2 learning, rather than as the actual target of the learning context, can be seen as one of its most promising characteristics (1999:14).’ At primary level in Finland they report that another common reason for CLIL was the drive for ‘internationalization’, considered to be in accordance with the spirit of the times and both an opportunity for and consequence of change. Recent views on constructivist approaches to learning provide another rationale for CLIL. According to Met (1998) constructivism provides ‘a strong rationale for content-based curricula, since it is holistically oriented and meaning-base. Unlike traditional models of learning, holistic approaches allow students to see how the parts fit into the whole right from the start.’ (1998: 37). Claims made by proponents, such as Williams and Burden 1997, include:

✓ constructivism allows for more active participation on the part of pupils;
✓ it incorporates a learning-centred, process view of learning;
✓ it increases potential for taking account of different learning styles and multiple intelligences which helps to uncover learners’ talent and potential;
✓ it leads to growing independence and self-sufficiency in pupils through the use of individual, group or pair work .

Thinking skills and learning strategies

A major problem with CLIL at primary level is that there is still a dearth of published materials available to teachers, although ELT course books have been increasingly using topics as a basis for language learning. International course books have for many years included topics such as Food, Animals, Dinosaurs. A primary ELT course book based on the Hong Kong syllabus includes topics such as Introducing the Five Senses, and My Family. What is noticeable is that these topics are not explored in depth in terms of learning and tend to provide grammatical continuity at the expense of content continuity. They may also place little emphasis on developing thinking skills or learning strategies.
In many foreign language contexts a focus on the processes of language and learning has led to the highlighting of thinking skills and learning strategies, as can be seen in the Hong Kong English Language Curriculum Guide (2003). In this document Key Learning Areas include Critical Thinking Skills such as extracting, classifying and organizing information, understanding cause and effect, recognizing obvious stereotypes, predicting, making hypotheses, making deductions and logical conclusions (2003: 72-73). Increasing recognition of the importance of these kinds of skills and strategies has led to their inclusion in other primary curricula in East Asia, such as Malaysia and Singapore. It is interesting to note how far language curricula are beginning to reflect content curricula. For example, in 1990 Russell and Harlen pinpointed key process skills for mainstream primary science in the UK, including:

- predicting using previous knowledge, 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, making inferences,
- drawing conclusions and communicating results.

Tasks in CLIL promote the use of a range of linguistic and cognitive processes, much of which is transferable across subjects/topics and even from the L2 to the L1. This transferability is recognised in The Hong Kong English Language Curriculum Guide:

‘Schools are encouraged to establish a cross-curricular linkage when developing their Schools-based language programme. The aims are to develop learners’ language skills and broaden their experience of language learning through language learning tasks or activities in contexts that are related to one of more Key Learning Areas.’ (2003: 99)

Task-based learning (TBL) is recognized as a key construct in the Hong Kong English Language Curriculum Guide (2003), where tasks are defined as, ‘purposeful and contextualized activities which draw together a range of elements in their framework of knowledge and skills to fulfil the task set.’ (2003: 117). Naturally, without well-designed materials and teachers well-trained in this kind of approach it is always difficult to match practice with rhetoric.

**Food: Primary CLIL materials in Switzerland**

I was recently part of a team in a UK university which developed a Masters course for CLIL teachers. Here I learned more about interesting CLIL materials developed for a CLIL project in Switzerland which provides a good model for primary practice. In 1998, a CLIL pilot project Schulprojekt 21 began in one canton in Zurich where more than 88 Grade 1-3 primary teachers have been implementing and developing this CLIL approach. The pupils are exposed to 90 minutes per week in ‘language showers’ of 20 – 30 minutes, where topics used include handicrafts, art, maths and sports. The pupils in these grades experience the language as rich comprehensible input where little output is expected and where code-switching is acceptable as long as the children demonstrate understanding in English. In an interview with the co-ordinator of this project, Jacomelli (2001:19) writes that ‘a task or activity-based approach does not place emphasis on grammar or language items, nor does it allow for the traditional systematic structural approach to language learning’. Rather, pupils are engaged in a range of tasks. Guidelines are provided for teachers which suggest areas in the curriculum where CLIL can be used to best advantage in each subject area and which suggest activities and objectives for all the skills. Children tend to acquire a large passive vocabulary, develop learning strategies and learn to recognise basic differences between German and English. Over time, the pupils ‘gradually become aware of some basic aspects of the English language’ (Jacomelli, op. cit) such as formation of plurals and the lack of declension in adjectives. From grades 4-6 pupils are expected to concentrate on specially produced materials on topics such as *People and their Environment, Animals and Food*. There are now over 170 teachers and 2000 pupils involved in this stage of the project. The following brief extract on the topic of *Food* illustrates the latter stages of work on this topic.
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Where Food Comes From / Plants
Ps choose favourite fruit and classify whether it grows in cold or hot countries. Ps classify vegetables according to whether they are eaten cooked, raw and whether all of it is eaten.
Ps classify both according to whether they grow on trees, bushes or on the ground. Apple Poem. Fruit quiz.
LANGUAGE: Names of fruit and vegetables, colours, sentence patterns ‘Tomatoes are red; tomatoes grow on bushes.’
THINKING: Classifying types of food.

Food and Health / The Food Pyramid
Ps listen and match labels to food, draw missing food and classify food items under meals e.g. breakfast foods
Ps classify food drawn in a healthy eating pyramid where food at the top and upper middle should be eaten a little, food at the lower middle and bottom should be eaten a lot.
Ps draw traffic lights for different foods which they should eat a lot of (red), eat some in moderation (amber) or eat very little of (green).
LANGUAGE: Names of foods; sentence pattern ‘There is some bread’ using countable and non-countable nouns. Pattern ‘There are a lot of sweets, I eat a little / a lot of …’
THINKING: Classifying healthy and less healthy types of food.

Unfortunately, these brief examples cannot do justice to the overall topic.

Characteristics of CLIL materials
My own view of tasks for CLIL is that they will work well if they tend to have the following characteristics:

- the focus is on language for thinking and school learning;
- there is little or no emphasis on a presentation, practice or production stages (PPP);
- a task-based learning approach is carried out in pairs, groups or individually which presents a scenario holistically and then systematically works backwards through its component parts;
- the tasks draw on a range of integrated skills, with numerous opportunities for listening, speaking, reading and writing;

these tasks are carefully sequenced to provide task continuity;

- language processes include providing evidence of learning, such as through listening or reading to label diagrams or underline key words, speaking and writing to produce models or a quiz; thinking processes include those such as predicting, making and checking hypotheses, matching causes and their effects and classifying.

- there has been careful analysis of the linguistic and cognitive demands of the tasks; thus the skills work is supported by clearly focused and contextualized activities which support the development of language and thinking processes;

- the tasks are all supported or scaffolded by contextualization in the form of visuals which might include a DVD, Powerpoint, graphic organisers such as diagrams, tables, maps or charts, cross-section models, realia, use of the Internet and so on.

- some of the work is differentiated so that, for example, reading tasks are supported by spoken versions of texts on cassette for slower learners; reading activities based on the same topic can be graded in terms of activities at word, phrase, sentence or simple text level.

- the work culminates in a ‘public’ product presented to classmates which is chosen by the pupils themselves and allows for creativity and personalization.

Conclusion
According to Smith and Patterson, (1998), research has consistently shown that ‘cognitively undemanding work, such as copying or repetition, especially when there is no context to support it, does not enhance language learning...By actively involving pupils in intellectually demanding work, the teacher is creating a genuine need for pupils to acquire the appropriate language.’ (1998:1).

As the teaching of English begins at an ever earlier age a major pedagogic issue will be how to keep students motivated and challenged by their learning, especially if the linguistic content of their learning remains basically ‘more of the same.’ Teachers, curriculum planners, materials writers and teacher educators need to work together to
find the right content and tasks which provide suitable levels of motivation, challenge together with appropriate forms of scaffolding or support to allow such challenges to be met. In this way curriculum targets may more easily be implemented.

References


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