

Integrating the Content-based Instruction into the American Civilization Class

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Abstract

Despite the fact that content-based instruction (CBI) is a curricular model that allows foreign language learners to simultaneously improve content of the subject matter and language skills, many Algerian foreign language teachers usually focus on the course content and neglect the linguistic aspect. This paper reports on an experiment conducted with first year EFL students where content-based instruction was implemented to foster the integration of content and language in order to provide a vehicle for foreign language learning. In the American civilization course taught in the department of English at Guelma University, a theme-based CBI instruction method was used as a means of providing first year EFL students with the opportunity to reinforce their language skills through themes in American history accompanied by a set of tasks conceived to promote their target language skills. Such an activity-based approach enabled students both to assimilate the content of the American civilization course and also to improve their foreign language proficiency.

Keywords: American civilisation; Content-Based Instruction (CBI); critical thinking; integrating language and content; study skills

Introduction

The department of English of the University of 8 May 1945 at Guelma in Algeria offers a license degree (Bachelor of Arts Degree) in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The latter includes the American Civilisation course that extends from the first to the third year for students majoring in English as a Foreign Language. The overall objective of this course is to make students more cognisant of the history, culture, and government of the American nation. Besides, throughout this course the students are expected to develop English language, and learn and practise, study skills and critical thinking skills through engagement in the course content.

Study skills help students situate and organise information. Study skills make it possible for students to learn more effectively and efficiently (Murphy, 2001, p. 7). They include the following skills: building vocabulary, summarising, understanding charts, reading graphs, using the library, writing an outline, taking notes, writing reports, and taking tests. Adjacent to study skills is critical thinking. It has also been proved that critical thinking skills are indispensable, and advantageous (Klooster, 2001, pp. 36-37). These skills include: interpretation, analysis, translating and synthesising, problem solving, forming hypotheses, and evaluation. So, critical thinking skills help students look below the surface of American history. They make the study of history more interesting, for if students can look critically at the events of ancient times, they will be able to make sense of today's world.

Statement of the Problem

Students of English as a foreign language have frequently complained that they did not really have the opportunity to make any progress in the acquisition of the English language or the skills in the American civilisation course because most of the class time is spent passively listening to the teacher presenting information-heavy lectures. Because of the size of the classes that amount to 36 students on average, lectures became more predominant. In such an environment, civilisation teachers do not usually have the time to provide classroom activities that would actively engage students in the learning process. Therefore, American civilisation teachers found themselves becoming the main dispensers of learning rather than facilitators of learning.

Because of the prevalence of the teacher-centered approach, and due to the instructional limitations with larger-sized classes, students in the American civilization class never have the opportunity to participate in the learning process. They seem content to just sit, passively absorbing the information. When questions are asked, few students are willing to respond and it is often the same ones. Exams also indicate that performance was below average for a considerable number of students.

Following these shortcomings realised from personal observation and students' frequent comments, a decision was made to explore another alternative approach to teaching the civilization course in a way that would increase student participation, engagement, and involvement in the learning process and more effective learning/digestion of the course material. It is meant to be a method based on active learning which requires students to share more than the teachers the responsibility for instruction/learning, because almost all theories of how people learn emphasize the importance of active participation in the learning process rather than passive observation (Olgun, Ö., 2009, 113-125). Active learning improves retention of course content, and listening to the teacher or classmates expose different opinions improves students interpreting and analyzing skills.

This paper, therefore, presents the results of an experiment conducted with a group of first year students of English at the University of Guelma in Algeria. The purpose of this experiment

is to find out if content-based instruction (CBI), also known in Europe as content language integrated learning (CLIL), is an effective approach in achieving the American civilization course objectives.

Theoretical Framework

CBI is an acronym for Content-Based Instruction. It is a paradigm to teaching a second/foreign language in which instruction is mainly based on a content which usually refers to a specific subject matter that people study or teach using a language. It is an approach where the language is taught within the context of a specific academic subject (Stoller, 2004, p. 261). In a CBI course, students gain knowledge and understanding of the curricular subject while at the same time learn and use the target language. A number of definitions of CBI have been given by several authors. For instance, Richards and Rodgers (2001) see that “Content-based Instruction refers to an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus” (204). Similarly, Brinton (2003) views Content-Based Instruction as “the teaching of language through exposure to content that is interesting and relevant to learners” (201). In this regard, Genesee (1994) argues that content does not have to be strictly academic but it can include any authentic topic, theme or non-language issue that is of interest to the learners (p.3).

More precisely, Snow (2001) says that Content “is the use of subject matter for second/foreign language teaching purposes. Subject matter may consist of topics or themes based on the interest or need in an adult EFL setting, or it may be very specific, such as the subjects that students are currently studying in their elementary school classes” (303). To Brinton, “Content-based instruction is the integration of particular content with language teaching aims...the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills” (Brinton et al., 2003, p.2). Taken together, these definitions suggest that CBI is an approach in which learners acquire the target language through content.

Benefits of CBI

Numerous foreign language educators (Snow, 1998; Stoller, 2004) have advocated the benefits of content-based instruction revealing that such instruction promotes academic development while also fostering language proficiency. They have all stressed the advantages and benefits of incorporating language and content instruction for second/foreign language students. They have also stated that content-based instruction has great advantages because classroom activities offer a framework for language learning. In other words, students can successfully get both language and subject matter knowledge by obtaining content input through activities in the target language.

Chamot and O'Malley (1994) assume that there are at least four reasons for integrating content into the English as a Second/Foreign Language class. First, content enables students to acquire significant knowledge in different courses. Second, content-based instruction provides students with the ability to master the language function and skills needed to understand, discuss, read, and write about the concepts acquired. Stated differently, CBI promotes an integrated skills approach to language teaching. For instance, students might read, take notes, summarise, or reply orally to what they have read or listened to. Third, the majority of students become greatly motivated when they learn content instead of learning language only. This means that students constantly explore interesting content and engage in language-dependent activities which can lead to inherent motivation. Fourth, content enables teachers to teach students different learning

strategies (26). In other words, students grasp the different learning strategies used by instructors when teaching content through activities such as brainstorming, recalling, listening, or note taking.

Over the past several decades, many approaches to content-based instruction have been developed. According to Stoller and Grabe (1997), the approaches differ in “representing diverse contexts for instruction, different perspectives on the integration of content and language, and differing assumptions about content, language, and learning strategies” (5).

Regardless of their differences, Straight (1994) regards that these approaches to CBI equally perceive language as a means for learning content, and content as a context for learning language. One of these approaches is that of ‘university-level foreign language CBI’. This approach involves foreign language instruction that is organised around cultural, geographic, historical, political, and literary themes.

Models of CBI in Higher Education

Depending on the learners’ requirements, interests and context, content-based instruction offers numerous models that can be applied in second/foreign language classes. According to Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003), the most common and dominant ones that are frequently used in foreign language education at the university level are: theme-based courses (TB), and adjunct/linked courses (AL) (p.19). These and other models of CBI vary from one another in terms of being content or language driven.

In the theme-based language instruction, the course outline is set around topics, with a content orientation whose main intention is students’ second/foreign language competence. In the theme-based course, the teacher acts both as a language and content instructor. In this model, topics may be introduced through both videos or/and handouts. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), the materials used to deal with the topics have to provide a great deal of useful input and to integrate all skills.

In the adjunct/linked language instruction model, students take two separate but coordinated courses which share a common content base; and which are taught by two separate teachers. One relies on content, and its main objective is to make students assimilate the subject matter. The other is based on the acquisition of language skills of the target language, and its chief aim is to enable students improve their language skills (Richards and Rodgers 2001). In the adjunct courses, learners are expected to master content and simultaneously develop language skills.

However, the essential aim of the sheltered content instruction model is to make students understand the content material with only minor language learning. In this mode, the teacher is in charge of both content and language, but students are assessed only on the content knowledge. With regard to instructional design, the above three models vary in the extent to which content and language are integrated. Stoller and Grab (1997) view that “practically all instruction is theme-based” (7). They also perceive that sheltered and adjunct instruction are “not alternatives to theme-based instruction but rather...two methods for carrying out theme-based instruction”. Accordingly, they see the two terms, “content-based instruction and theme-based instruction as interchangeable” (op cit).

Notwithstanding the model, in order to effectively put into practice a content-based instruction course, the following fundamental attributes must be included. First, content must be the organising principle of the course because second/foreign languages are well acquired when the focal point is on mastery of content more than on mastery of language in isolation (Nunan, 1999, p. 209), 2). Second, the content-based method must also use authentic language and texts.

The latter, according to Stryker and Leaver (1997), may include videotapes, audio recordings, handouts, visual aids, and web resources (p. 8). Third, it is important to select authentic learning activities; these are tasks related to real events, people, or places that enable students to become more active in their learning, and require them to interact with others and engage in critical or deeper-level thinking. Content and language tasks must also be appropriate to the professional needs and personal interests of students. Maly contends that “students-generated themes and activities create an atmosphere in which the students take responsibility for their own learning and the teacher becomes more of a manager of student learning” (Maly, 1993, p. 41 in Stryker and Leaver, 1997, p. 11).

Background of the Study

The general objective of the present study is to determine if the use of the theme-based CBI model in the American civilisation course improves the students’ English language. Specifically, the study examined whether students, through engagement in the course content, will demonstrate the ability to improve their: 1) study skills like (building vocabulary, understanding charts, reading graphs, using the library, taking notes, writing an outline, writing reports, and taking tests; and 2) thinking skills such as (interpretation, analysis, translating and synthesising, problem solving, forming hypotheses, and evaluation. This teaching experiment was conducted to critically assess the impact of CBI so that needed changes could be made as a consequence in the American civilisation course. Since the experiment is a fresh one, its results could also provide helpful information to other faculty within the department of English who want to use this instructional method in their classes.

Participants, Methodology and Data

The participants subject to the present study were two first year groups of 32 graduate students each pursuing a B.A (licence) degree in English as a foreign language. The students were all native speakers of Arabic. They attended the American civilisation course once a week on Mondays from 8.00 a.m. to 9.30 a.m. Some of the themes covered in the American civilisation course during the first year are: Focus on US Geography, the First Americans, the Thirteen English Colonies, the American Revolution, and Creating the American Republic.

In the first group, the teaching method is chiefly built on a teacher-centered method, where students spend most of the time passively listening to the teacher presenting information-heavy lectures. In that environment and with such traditional method prevalent in most Algerian universities, the American civilisation teacher does not usually have the time to provide classroom tasks that would promote students’ language skills. Consequently, students have less opportunity to participate or engage in activities which would enable them to make a steady progress in the acquisition of the English language or language skills in the American civilisation course. In these lecture-style classes, the teacher is often considered a “bank of knowledge” from which students get information rather than contribute (Howard, et al., 1996, 8-24). In such classes, students often will disengage from the learning process and may only appear to be paying attention (Karp and Yoels, 1976, 421-39).

With the second group, a different curricular approach is adopted, one which integrates content with study and critical thinking skills. In this approach, the civilisation teacher acts as a guide and as a facilitator of learning. Being an expert in content and language, his main role is to enable students promote their study skills, and develop concepts of critical thinking and inquiry. In this approach, some web components are incorporated in order to offer students the

convenience and flexibility of online research without losing face-to-face instruction and student interaction in the classroom.

This is so because blended courses which combine online with traditional delivery of instruction can be better suited to classroom participation than just online methods or lectures (Baer, J., & Baer, S.K., 2005, 83-101). Therefore, prior to each American civilisation class, students were given handouts dealing with a major theme or chapter of the American history, with the instruction to carry out online research and complete activities to ensure that everyone shares a common knowledge base. Then during class time, the content can be enriched with application and problem solving activities to allow students think critically and discuss their views about the content.

Each chapter covers a particular time period and deals with a major development in American history. The chapter is divided into two or more sections. Each section opens with key terms, which are either vocabulary words or important terms in American history; and which are all defined in the text. Each section includes the main idea, a brief preview, and several objectives under the form of questions which students must keep in mind as they go through the text. At the end of each section, students will be asked to review the key terms and names of important people and places. There are questions covering the section objectives, and a critical thinking question that asks students to reflect on what they have learned. At the end of each chapter, students are asked to sum up the chapter. This is always followed by a variety of tasks, including other critical thinking (comprehension) questions, and written assignments.

In order to achieve these objectives, a qualitative design was adopted. Data collection was done over a two-semester period of time. The methods used to collect information were proposed by Tedick and Camarata (2007) who identify many forms of assessment that can test language and content, and who point out that the most important to CBI are: a) Culminating presentations and/or written essays at the end of the course, b) Project-based learning where language and content are constantly used to analyse, synthesise, plan, and research information. The teacher's observations and evaluations of the tasks carried out in class, and scores obtained in final exams also provided information about the students' progress in learning. This is so because CBI is performance based.

Study Procedure

The following sections describe the strategies used to design and implement the CBI model and the results of the action research study conducted. The paper concludes by summarising the challenges encountered, the lessons learned and the future directions for the CBI course within the restrictions of a limited-resource environment.

The action research study focused on four areas of the students' experiences during the experimental study: 1) Did the CBI approach improve the students' study skills and critical thinking skills? 2) Did the CBI approach increase the students' active involvement in the course and engagement in the course content? 3), Did the CBI approach increase the students' participation? and 4) Did the CBI approach increase the students' interest and motivation in the content and overall satisfaction with the course?

To answer and measure these questions four types of data were collected. The same exams were given to the two study groups of the American civilisation course in order to compare the CBI group results with the non-CBI group. The exams consisted of defining key items, short answer questions, and essay form questions to test language and content and measure understanding and application of the skills covered in the course. Project-based assignments

where language and content were constantly used to analyse, synthesise, plan, and research data; were also given to both the CBI group and the non-CBI group after each theme was completed to measure students' perceptions of how the approach affected their levels of progress in the content assimilation and skills development. Informal observations, analyses, and interpretations of students' behaviour during class sessions, and information about students' viewing the approach were used to determine the level of the two groups' learning, participation, interest, and satisfaction.

Study Results

In what follows, the most significant findings obtained from examining the obtained data are presented.

Question 1: Did the CBI approach improve the students' study skills and critical thinking skills?

Students' performance in written exams revealed that the CBI group had a slightly higher average score (24 out of 32) than the non-CBI group (16 out of 32). These results were promising and showed that students could learn the content better with the CBI approach. The respondents' achievements in written assignments also showed that students in the CBI group have really improved their study skills and critical thinking skills in a relevant, challenging, and meaningful manner. Conversely, the written assignments of students in the non-CBI group reflected an obvious lack of mastery of both skills and content.

Question 2: Did the CBI approach increase the students' active involvement in the course and engagement in the course content?

In the CBI group, more than 90% (29 out of 32) of students agreed that the CBI approach contributed to their learning, and they said they felt more engaged in the course subject matter. They thought that this approach promoted interaction between the teacher and them, that it enhanced reciprocity and cooperation among students, promoted active learning, provided prompt feedback, and increased time on tasks. More than 60% (20 out of 32) students in the non-CBI group reported that they disliked the lecture format and mentioned that they had little opportunities to ask or answer questions; that they received little instructor feedback, and perceived the course content to be too loaded for independent learning. This resulted in an obvious absence of engagement in the course content.

Question 3: Did the CBI approach increase student participation?

More than 80% (26 out of 32) of the students confessed that their participation in class increased as a result of the theme-based CBI format. During informal observations of in-class students' participation, the students' response rate to questions tended to be higher in the CBI group, and the lowest in the non-CBI group. In all likelihood, this is so because students in the CBI group believe that this instruction model increased their confidence and willingness to participate.

Question 4: Did the CBI approach increase student interest and motivation in the content and overall satisfaction with the course?

The CBI approach helped to promote interest in the course material, with about 90% of the students who perceived an increased interest in the content; against 75% who indicated that the tasks helped them to go more in-depth on the topics. The latter also admitted that the approach promoted their prior knowledge in English, lessened their anxiety, raised their self-confidence and motivation towards language learning.

However, one weakness of the approach mentioned by the students was the large-size class which does not allow all students to take part in the activities. On the whole, the results of the

action research study were positive. Students using the CBI format learned the content, and many indicated that their engagement, preparation, participation, and interest increased. The major challenge faced in this experimental study was finding the time for course development, and correction of frequent assignments.

Many valuable lessons were learned with the CBI approach. It is more manageable, feedback more quickly obtained and necessary modifications more easily made. In CBI, there is a move away from teacher as instructor to teacher as facilitator, with an emphasis on cooperative learning and learner-centeredness. A benefit for the learner is that they can gain new knowledge about subject content while at the same time coming into contact with, learning about and using and improving the foreign language. These benefits can help other educators who are starting to use CBI learning or considering the use of this technique in their teaching.

Conclusion

One major reason for the adoption of the CBI approach is to increase the students' engagement and involvement in the learning process, i.e. to improve their learning. It goes without saying that mastery of a thorough knowledge of a foreign language in the twenty-first century might help students simultaneously develop some core skills and competencies, e.g. critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication, collaboration, information and ICT literacies, self-initiative, social interaction, productivity and leadership.

This experimental study showed that, if designed correctly, content-based instruction can serve as an effective learning strategy that promotes student participation, engagement, and interactivity. The analysis of collected data revealed that students developed both study and critical thinking skills in a relevant, challenging, and meaningful manner because the approach implemented is based on the integration of language and content. Students also reported satisfaction with CBI instruction, and viewed it to have generally been very positive with convenience and that controlling the pace of learning was considered to be the major benefits of the CBI approach.

One may venture to assume that content-based instruction can effectively suit language teaching when integrated in the American civilisation class. In addition to the assimilation of content, well conceived tasks or class activities could enable students to build vocabulary, understand charts, read graphs, use the library, write an outline, write reports, take notes and take tests.

Through class activities and written essays, presentations, or projects, students can also develop critical thinking skills, such as interpretation (cause and effect relationships, making and supporting generalisations, inferring and drawing conclusions, and detecting bias), analysis (showing that they understand what they read), translating (presenting information in a form that is different from the way they receive it), problem solving (making choices or taking decisions), forming hypotheses (collect and piece together the bits of information in order to answer a puzzling question), or evaluation (making a judgement about an event).

About the Author

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