

# Content-Language Approach

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## An Abstract

More scrutiny, lately, has been carried out in the field of teaching and learning English as a second or foreign Language (Lorenz and Met,1988;Mojhanovich and Fish, 1988 ; Snow, 1987);the question goes to the effectiveness of any learning and teaching when they are being,mostly,realized in an environment irrelevant to the people and culture of the language itself.Hence the renewed zeal for the content-based approach of foreign and second language instruction,English in particular.such method of instruction aims at restructuring not only the curriculum but also the environment where the language is being taught and learned.This article is only one attempt at trying to fathom the approach,its dimensions as well as implication.Starting with a definition,it then moves to the exploration of the history of language-content instruction.The stress,nevertheless,is placed on the planning of instruction,as the integration of content and language may not be so accessible at the first stages of students`proficiency development.A redefinition of the role of the teacher,moreover,is needed.it is not only that he/she structures the environment,makes both language and content accessible,assesses students`growth,but he/she also acts as a model of language learning and teaching.What is finally discussed,therefore,in this article are the implications that content-language instruction may have on re-shaping the roles that language teachers play inside and outside the classroom.For they are the true wizards of language learning and teaching.

A great controversy,it is known,evolves around the acquisition of English as a second or foreign language.though differing and multiple are the approaches suggested,they do all agree that any education of a minority language students seem to be based on the assumption that proficiency in English prerequisite for academic learning(Collier,1989;Cummins,1981). Yet before speculating academic levels,we are to start with the foundation.The elementary level is the base where any proficiency in English may be spurred.A variety of current trends at both the elementary and secondary levels are resulting in a growing enthusiasm for"content-based"foreign language curriculum and instruction(Met,1991).

## *What is Content-Based Foreign Language instruction*

Content-based foreign language instruction uses learning objectives and activities drawn from the elementary school curriculum as a vehicle for learning foreign language skills.The foreign language may be the sole vehicle for teaching the content,substituting for native language instruction;or instruction through the foreign language may augment and supplement content instruction in the native language.This same method of

instruction is also named “language immersion;”and the results of such method,Mimi Met(1994)claims,have shown that students can develop content knowledge at the same time as they develop language skills.In total immersion orograms,school activities-from mundane tasks such as collecting money for trips to cognitively demanding tasks,such as learning how to read-are conducted in the foreign or second language(Met,1994).

### **Content-Based Instruction:An Historical Perspective**

One important influence on the growth of content-based foreign language programs is the successful establishment of immersion programs in both Canada and the United States.For over twenty years,Canadian students have had the opportunity to develop high levels of proficiency in French through participation in immersion programs-programs in which the school curriculum is taught the medium of foreign language.Immersion students learn at least half the school curriculum through the medium of a foreign language and thereby also learn language through content.Research results show that students in immersion programs acquire both content knowledge and high levels of foreign language proficiency (Genesee,1987).

Actually it is in the eighties that the stress wasplaced on proficiency in any foreign language acquisition.In secondary and post secondary schools,proficiency-oriented foreign language instruction places great value on using language for purposeful communication.Students in proficiency-oriented settings engage in activities that offer real or simulated opportunities for exchanging information about real life events.

The proficiency movement characteristic of secondary and postsecondary instruction today is itself derived from a European trend in the 1970s to mold foreign language instruction to the communicative needs of learners.It has been believed since then that content-based instruction develops a wider range of discourse skills than does traditional language instruction,since it provides opportunities for using skills beyond mere description and identification.Students gain skills in expressing language fuctions such as explaining,classifying,comparing and evaluating.

### **Planning for Instruction**

All good teachers must be good planners. Costa and Garmston(1985) have suggested that good teaching rests on good planning, a process which is cognitively demanding. According to them good teachers see each lesson in terms of long range and short term instruction goals. They think about the lesson from the viewpoint of the learner and consider how individual learning styles, preferences, and abilities will interact with the lesson to be delivered. Effective teachers identify what they and their students will be doing in each part of the lesson, anticipating difficulties and ensuring that time and material needed for the lesson will be available.

Teachers who educate their students in a foreign or second language need to do all the above. But their unique charge requires that they perform additional planning tasks as well. These include sequencing objectives, planning for language growth, identifying instructional activities that make content accessible, selecting instructional material appropriate for students, and planning for assessment.

### **Sequencing Content Objectives.**

Immersion teachers ought to develop long range of plans by considering the language demands of the required objectives. So that those requiring the most language skills are postponed until students have had an opportunity to increase their language proficiency. Some objectives can be taught primarily by hand-on or visual experience. Later, objectives needing more advanced oral or writing skills may be taught. This is to say that teachers must suit the objective they choose to teach in accordance to level of proficiency that the students are at.

### **Planning content lessons that contain language objectives**

Teachers need to view each content lesson as a language lesson. On the other hand, each language lesson is an opportunity and enhancing a certain concept or set of concepts. Snow, Met and Genesse(1989) have suggested a conceptual framework for identifying language objectives and have described how

teachers in a variety of teaching settings can fulfill their role within this framework. The authors identify two kinds of language objectives: content-obligatory and content-compatible language objectives. Content obligatory language is a language that is so closely associated with a specific content objective that students cannot master the content without learning the language as well. For example, students cannot explain when to add or subtract without knowing first these terms. In contrast, content-compatible language can be easily taught through a content lesson, but the material could be taught and learned without knowledge of this vocabulary, grammar or language function. For example, sixth grade students can discuss any subject in social sciences with their own vocabulary without having to learn first an obligatory set of concepts but when they do their vocabulary will certainly be enriched. This is not to deny that content compatible language objectives are an important factor in students' continued language growth. They help teachers focus on how student's language skills may be stretched, refined and expanded beyond their personal level of attainment. All teachers who are teaching English as a second or foreign language may find it very helpful to integrate both content-compatible and content-obligatory into each lesson.

### **Planning for instructional material**

One outgrowth of planning activities is the identification of materials needed for instruction. These will include manipulatives, visuals, print and non-print media. Although all teachers obviously have to consider these things as ingredients of their lessons, those who educate through a second language, must add special criteria for selecting materials; the material chosen must be compatible with the students' level of proficiency. This is why teachers must decide whether to adapt existing materials or develop their own. Sometimes, especially with young learners, it is preferable to bring self-made materials, as they will suit, according to teacher's assessment, the needs of the students (Lorenz and Met, 1988).

## **Integrating Culture**

Those who work with second language students will want to plan for the integration of culture. This may mean teaching students about the culture of the language they are learning or about their culture itself. Where possible, culture is to be infused with the other objectives of the curriculum. Cultural aspects can be integrated, for instance, within a geography lesson, or even a science lesson. Similarly, this is not to overlook the socio-cultural needs of the students themselves, their attitudes towards the objectives learned and the language itself; considering the students' social and cultural background may help students function in a new culture, and reinforce positive attitudes to student's home culture.

### **In the classroom: teaching students in the second language**

Conveying a certain domain of knowledge is never an easy task, especially when the act and process of conveying is accomplished in a second or foreign language. In the content-language approach, teachers, therefore, have a dual, or even multiple role to play within the classroom as well as the school at large. Teachers, first of all, must be skilled in negotiating meaning; they must have well developed skills in monitoring students' performance; they must be experts in instructional decision-making; they must serve as model for the use of language, cultural behaviors and learning strategies; and they need to structure the environment to facilitate language learning. Each of these tasks is described in the following paragraphs.

### ***Negotiating meaning***

The negotiation of meaning is a maneuver of the many ways through which teachers and students make themselves understood to each other. "It is a collaborative process of give and take in which each participant works to send and receive comprehensible messages (Hawkins, 1988; Saville-Troike, 1987; Snow, 1989). Negotiation of meaning is deeply critical in classrooms where students are learning content in a new language. If the meaning of what is learned is unclear, it will be difficult for students to

acquire the skills and knowledge of the curriculum. Although there are many aspects to this process, and some of these aspects often occur simultaneously, for the purpose of discussion here the role of the teacher will be discussed from three perspectives: making language understandable to students, helping students making themselves understood and expanding and refining students' language repertoire. These roles are discussed in greater detail below.

### ***Making language and content accessible***

Because comprehension is essential to the learning of content, the teacher must ensure that his students understand what he is trying to teach. In delivering content lessons, teachers accompany talk with many contextual clues. Most characteristically, such lessons rely heavily on concrete materials, hand-on experiences, visuals; these help students match language with meaning. Sometimes it is also helpful to link new learning to background knowledge. Teachers, moreover, make language comprehensible by modifying speech; they speak more slowly, emphasize key words, use more familiar or simpler vocabulary and grammatical structures. Repetition and paraphrasing as well as body language can also be helpful in conveying a certain message. These same strategies can also be employed by students to make themselves understood. Thus students should have ready access within the classroom to visual and concrete materials. However, students should be encouraged to use both verbal and nonverbal support for their messages.

Teachers enable students to communicate verbally by making a rich interpretation of students' attempt to communicate (Wells, 1986), and by maintaining open channels of communication. These are often accompanied by checks for understanding.

### ***Expanding and refining students' language***

Gradually as students become more skilled in their new language, teachers must help them expand and refine their language skills. This is done both in the course of instruction, as teachers respond to students directly, or as they observe student to communication. This in turn becomes observational data

for planning for students`language growth and identifying content compatible language objectives for future lessons.

Because continued growth in language proficiency upon extended opportunities for linguistic interaction,teachers need to provide for frequent collaborative learning activities both student-to-student and student-teacher language practice.

### ***The teacher as monitor***

The teacher`s task is to implement the lesson designed the planning phase,yet monitor the lesson and students while teaching it.Monitoring is an integral part of the feedback cycle needed for effective formative evaluation.As teachers continuously monitor contentmastery and language development,they observe and analyze students`verbal and nonverbal performance,checking for understanding of language and concepts.Ofeten it is difficult to ascertain whether students have difficulty with content because of their lack of language proficiency or despite it.Because teachers of the second or foreign language need to provide many opportunities for the linguistic and knowledge growth of their students,they need as well to provide other opportunities for monitoring such growth.A useful approach to monitoring student-performance is to identify in advance indicators of on-task behavior,or successful content mastery,and of successful linguistic performance.Observations focused on such clearly identified indicators and use of record-keeping devices,such as checklists and anecdotal records,will promote effective monitoring of students and provide for sound instructional decision making

### ***Instructional decision making***

Jackson(1968)has noted that teachers may make as many as 1300 nontrivial instructional decisions each day.Effective instructional decision-making requires a repertoire of instructional options,and knowledge base necessary for choosing wisely among the options.Yet while all effective teachers need a repertoire of instructional approaches,teachers in second or foreign language settings need an expanded repertoire for stategies for making abstract skills

and concepts concrete. That is, not only must the teacher have alternative approaches for teaching a given concept, the alternatives must also address the special linguistic and cultural needs of students. And the use of multiple approaches to making concepts understandable often means that a variety of learning preferences are addressed (i.e. the visual, the tactile, the kinesthetic, etc.). Good decision making, therefore, requires more than repertoire, more than is, than an awareness of the many options available within the classroom. For teachers who teach content in a language new to students, informed decision making may depend upon an even deeper understanding of students and how they learn than it does in monolingual settings.

### ***The teacher as model***

For students who are being educated in the second or foreign language, teachers are models for linguistically and culturally appropriate behaviors. The teacher models both the academic and social language student will need. Besides certain contents in the second language, teachers also demonstrate social linguistic behavior; they greet students, discuss student's activities outside the school setting, describe their own activities, and conduct administrative routines that provide many opportunities for non-instructional interaction. One example of such behavior is the demonstration of culturally appropriate behavior and nonlinguistic features that the teacher may demonstrate in his daily interaction with the students and with other teachers; these may again teach the students about the culture and people of the language they learn.

Like teachers of native speakers, second language teachers can also model learning. Such techniques as reciprocal questioning and think aloud protocols (Bereiter and Bird, 1985) modeled by teachers and later on used by students, have a dual function when students are learning content through a second language; on the one hand, these techniques help students to acquire useful strategies to improve and monitor their own learning. On the other hand, the demonstration of such strategies by the teacher provides the



students with the language they need in order to organize their thinking and promote, consequently, higher cognitive processes.

### ***Structuring the environment***

Teachers of the second language can help students acquire content in a language strange to them by carefully structuring the environment. A daily schedule that follows predictable patterns can facilitate language comprehension in the early of language learning. Classroom routines such as taking attendance and collecting money can help students begin to recognize the relation between the oral classroom vocabulary and the associated print labels. Visual aids, furthermore, can support content objectives and help learning them. Most importantly, learning centers can contribute both to content learning and language development.

### **Assessing Students' progress**

Assessment is, no doubt, an integral part of any learning/teaching process. Assessment procedures can help teachers, on the one the hand, evaluate the degree to which students have met the objectives learned and plan their next teaching, on the other. Assessment may be either summative or formative; that is, it may take place either at the end of the unit of study or throughout the whole unit. Teachers, however, continuously assess and monitor students' performance informally during instruction. Information about student's performance collected in such an informal manner is based on student's verbal and nonverbal feed back during the course of lessons. What teachers need to measure through such assessment are: concept mastery and language proficiency.

### ***Assessing concept mastery***

It is difficult at the first stages of language development to assess students' performance and learning of contents, as they have not yet acquired the linguistic tools to verbalize them. This is why Mimi Met (1994) suggests several ways of alternative assessment; students may be asked to act out their knowledge; students may be given physical objects with which to

demonstrate their understanding.as when students categorize plastic foods into the four basic groups.Pictures can be part of tests,with students crossing out pictures that do not belong in a given group.Or they can draw a picture to show what they know.

Performance assessment is a way of measuring student achievement”by means of observation and professional judgment”(Stiggins,1987).It is "the process of gathering data by systematic observation for making decisions about the individuals”. (Berk,1986). Classroom based performance uses a variety of procedures and approaches: portfolios of students` work, ongoing observation of classroom activities,conferences with individual students about their assignments and projects.

A major part of the teacher`s instructional decision making may be based on the verbal an nonverbal behavior of students as described above.These may be the ways to assess language proficiency,as "language proficiency is important to nearly every thing that takes place in education”(Oller,1991).

### ***Assessing language proficiency***

Assessing language skills can definitely be performed during the course of content instruction. Conferences with small groups or individual students may help the teacher see the degree the students can express content-related language. Similarly, dialogue journals and learning logs provide teachers with information about students' linguistic performance.

Above all, students' classroom language may provide the most authentic resource for students' progress.

It is clear then that as instruction progresses, and as teachers observe the growth of students in the course of teaching and learning activities, a great deal of assessment data can be collected about the achievement of both content and language objectives.

### **Conclusion**

Knowing already that the approach of the content based language instruction has already been tested by practice abroad and in Israel, the question to be asked is the following: What implication may emerge from this approach in relation to foreign or second language learning and teaching in general and the role of the teacher in such processes in specific? To start with, language cannot stand apart from content learning; rather, language should be acquired through content learning just as content may be learned through language. Thus language will be captured as a means to be used rather than as an end by itself that some student, specially the weaker ones, may think unnecessary to their education.

Teachers, moreover, ought, through this approach, to redefine their instructional responsibilities; they may also redefine their relationships with their students and to each other. Teachers are not only responsible for teaching the language and the content required, but also structure the environment in a way that will help the students understand what is being taught, for meeting a certain objective may not be so accessible when the students are at the first stages of language development. Clearly, too, in schools where second

language teachers work side by side with content teachers, there needs to be a coordinated approach to meeting the needs of the students. Collaborative planning among teachers can ensure that the linguistic demands of content learning are addressed both in the second language and in the content classroom. Similarly, collaborative planning can enable teachers to provide content based lessons that support, reinforce and coordinate with content lessons provided by other teachers.

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## تلخيص

طريقة تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية حسب المضامين Content-based هي طريقة مبنية على الفلسفة القائلة أن تعليم أي لغة وبالذات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لا يتم إلا إذا خلقت بيئة ملائمة لتعليم اللغة.

البيئة هنا لا تتطرق فقط إلى المكان الفيزي، ولكن إلى ضرورة تعليم مضامين حياتية، منهجية ولا منهجية من خلال اللغة الإنجليزية – مثل تعليم الرياضيات أو العلوم باللغة الإنجليزية كطريقة متكاملة لاكتساب المضمون نفسه واللغة في آن واحد.

## تקציר

Content-based-approach הינה שיטת הוראה שמאמינה בהכוונה הוליסטית להוראת שפות ובמיוחד השפה האנגלית. שיטה זו דוגלת שיש ליצור סביבה הולמת וכוללנית שמשמעה שתכנים שונים, כגון מתמטיקה, מדעים, בשפה אנגלית. בשיטה זו מלמדים אנגלית כשפה תקשורתית מצד אחד ותכנים פורמליים ובלתי פורמליים מהצד השני.