

Reactions to Content-based Instruction in the L2 University Classroom

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Introduction

In this article I analyze the reactions of a class of Japanese university students to content-based instruction (CBI) in a second language university communication course. I instructed the students in a one-semester, elective CBI course titled Cross-Cultural Perspectives with instruction based on authentic L1 content while purposely avoiding the instruction of grammar or the use of deductive L2 exercises. I gave students a questionnaire at the end of the semester to evaluate their reactions to CBI-style instruction and provide an analysis of their answers. I also describe my own observations of CBI from the view of an instructor who is more accustomed to teaching courses which follow a prescribed L2 curriculum based heavily on form over content.

What is Content-based Instruction?

CBI is an L2 teaching approach which integrates the teaching of content with language with the emphasis on content over form. Students learn about something in another language rather than learning about the second language itself. In other words, the second language is more of a necessary tool through which students learn in the context of a specific subject or topic. Because the content is not limited by decontextualized linguistic items, the breadth of pedagogical content is very wide. For example, second-language students can learn the L2 through such varied subjects or topics as Ancient Egyptian Culture, Gender Equality, Environmental Sustainability, Modern Architecture, etc.

The underlying educational premise behind CBI is that it is a very student-centered approach which provides L2 learners with interesting and authentic

content in thematic units. Students improve their second-language skills through direct immersion in the subjects they are studying and acquisition of the L2 occurs naturally in a similar way in which the L1 is acquired.

It is not surprising then that the CBI approach correlates closely with comprehensible input and its hypothesis that language acquisition occurs with the help of context which is slightly beyond the user's present level of competence (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). CBI-style instruction is also characterized by providing students with opportunities to use the second language in meaningful exchanges with other students (Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989).

Students are typically attracted to CBI-style learning because it challenges them to use the L2 in real communication. This is an important characteristic which is often lacking in their conventional L2 classes which stress an educational approach of form over content.

Setting and Participants

The participants in this study were 25 first and second-year English Department students at a university in Tokyo who ranged from high-intermediate to low-advanced in English ability. The duration of the course was fourteen weeks and the class met once a week for a three-hour block each session.

Purpose and Aim

The overall purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of CBI to engage students in the use of meaningful, authentic exchanges in the L2 with the specific aim of analyzing students' reactions to it as an alternative approach to learning English.

Course Description

The title of the course was Cross-Cultural Perspectives which focused on three geographical regions of the world; Europe, Asia and Africa. Students were exposed to various facets of these regions such as history, government, geography, music, food, art, language, religion, etc. The structure of the class was made up of part lecture, group discussions, presentations, vocabulary usage, and film clips with

outside classwork comprising research, assigned reading of articles, and the writing of reports.

We spent three weeks on each geographical region. I evaluated the students partly based on three quizzes and a final comprehensive test. Each quiz reflected the content related to each one of the three geographical regions with questions about the readings, lectures, film clips, vocabulary, and geography. The final exam tested students on the same content but excluded the questions pertaining to the vocabulary and film clip components.

I designated seven to eight different students the task of researching a cultural aspect about an assigned country each week. They wrote a report about the cultural aspect and lead a five-minute group discussion on the content in English. They repeated the discussion several times in one class with different groups. During the course of the semester, students completed three such reports/oral discussions about the cultural aspects corresponding to the region we were covering at that time.

Students spent the last two weeks of the course on the preparation and presentation of research which they had conducted on a country of their choice. Students gave their class presentations in groups of 4-5 students and I gave them great latitude to choose what they wanted to present to their class. The group presentation formed a substantial part of their grade.

Questionnaire

I submitted a questionnaire to the students about their experiences using CBI at the conclusion of the course. Before submitting the questionnaire, I explained the concept of CBI to the students and how it differed from non-CBI instruction. I felt it was important that my students know some of the pedagogical background of CBI, so that they could better answer the questions contained in the questionnaire. In addition, I informed the students that the reason for the questionnaire was to obtain information about their participation in the course and that their answers would be used for research purposes only.

The questionnaire findings are presented in Table 1. In regard to the type of questions, I queried students not only on their views of their involvement with CBI in my course but also on their views of CBI in their other English language courses. The students' answers indicate that they believed that their English improved to varying degrees as a result of participating in this course (Question #1) and a

Table 1 Results of Students' Questionnaire Answers

Questions + Answers	Number of Students
1. Do you think your English improved as a result of completing this course?	
a. Yes, it did.	12
b. Yes, it did some.	9
c. Yes, it did a little	4
d. No, it didn't.	0
2. Did any of the following items make it easy for your to better understand the course content?	
a. The teacher's lectures.	4
b. The reading handouts.	2
c. The vocabulary lists.	4
d. None of the above.	0
e. All of the above.	15
3. Would you recommend this course to your friends as a way to improve their English skills?	
a. Yes, I would.	23
b. No, I wouldn't.	0
c. I am not sure if I would.	2
4. How interesting did you find this course overall?	
a. I found it very interesting.	16
b. I found it interesting.	6
c. I found it a little interesting.	3
d. I didn't find it interesting.	0
5. What would be your preference for grammar in this course?	
a. A lot more grammar in this course.	2
b. Some more grammar in this course.	3
c. A little more grammar in this course.	5
d. No grammar in this course.	15
e. I have no preference.	0
6. What would be your preference for grammar in your other English- language courses?	
a. A lot of grammar in my other courses.	13
b. Some grammar in my other courses.	7
c. A little grammar in my other courses.	5
d. No grammar in my other courses.	0
e. I have no preference	0
7. Do you think that CBI is a good way to learn English in your English courses?	
a. Yes, but only in this English course.	12
b. Yes, but only in some English courses.	9
c. Yes, in all of my English courses.	4
d. No, in none of my English courses.	0

Note: I instructed students to select only one answer to each question.

majority of them thought that they were able to access the course content because of the different pedagogical items which I made available to them (Question #2). The data also showed that students were very satisfied with the course in that they would recommend it to their friends to take (Question #3), and all of them found it interesting more or less (question #4).

Most students preferred little or no instruction of grammar in this course (Question #5). Conversely, when asked about grammar instruction in their other English-language courses, they answered that they would want a lot or some instruction of it (Question #6). Apparently, their views of CBI were limited to the type of English-language courses they were enrolled in, as most or some of them, answered that CBI should be used in this course, or some of their courses but not in all of them (Question #7).

Observations

CBI was very effective in getting my students to use the L2 in meaningful and authentic language in the classroom. I observed that my students were very interested in their conversation topics by the relatively high degree of exchanges which they produced. In almost all cases, the students conducted these exchanges in English without encouragement from me. In addition, they appeared very enthusiastic when it came to the discussions and presentations. Almost everyone was very receptive to my instruction in that I found it relatively easy to motivate my students in completing their tasks on time, too.

The contrast to my conventional ESL classes, in which grammar instruction and controlled exercises play a central role, could not have been more different. Many of the students in these classes show a considerable lack of enthusiasm for their studies and rarely engage in the L2 unless pushed to do so. There are also problems with students completing their class tasks and homework assignments within the allotted time.

This has disheartened me at times and made me question the effectiveness of teaching English to students who obviously do not care for deductive-style instruction. However, I plod on for the simple reason that such instruction is part of the curriculum and the students must pass a comprehensive exam at the conclusion of the semester.

The course I describe in this study was one which I personally designed, so I

was both knowledgeable and comfortable with its content and understandably excited to teach it. I was able to convey much of my own personal knowledge to the class on many occasions. All in all, I found my experience in teaching this course more rewarding than my usual teaching duties requiring me to follow a prescribed grammar curriculum.

I also observed that my role in this class was different from my other non-CBI ESL courses. Apart from the short lectures, I acted more as a facilitator rather than as an instructor. While students were engaged in their weekly group discussions, I would often join them in their discussions. They were very responsive to my participation and seemed intent on communicating what they knew about the topic under discussion with me as well as with their fellow students.

Discussion

In the design preparations for this course, my goal was to make it as content-based as possible while minimizing the instruction of English as a second language. My attempt was successful for the most part, but I could not ignore the obvious fact that English was the second language for all the participating students and many of them found the content somewhat difficult to access. Although the reading assignments were equivalent to what one would find in an L1 classroom on the same topic, I realized that students would need some support in comprehending the content soon after starting the course. To address this need, I provided lists of difficult vocabulary and their definitions to students in each class meeting. The vocabulary lists corresponded to the more difficult, higher-frequency words found in the reading assignments which I included in my lectures as much as possible. As to the content contained in the readings, I also encouraged students to ask me to provide them with additional explanations when they encountered something they could not understand.

My recognition of my students' inability to totally cope with the L1 materials without additional language support does not mean that CBI was a failure. On the contrary, a better term for such CBI instruction is commonly referred to as sheltered language teaching. According to Krashen, such teaching is ideal for intermediate-level students who are at just the right "input level"- not too low to not understand and not too high to make the course too simple. "Sheltered subject matter classes are subject matter classes: They are not language classes. If there are tests or projects,

the focus is on the subject matter, not the language. This focus, paradoxically, insures more language acquisition: If we test grammar and vocabulary, students will study grammar and vocabulary. This is not effective. But if we test subject matter, or require projects based on subject matter, students will come to class, do the reading, engage in discussion, and thereby, obtain more comprehensible input. The result will be more language acquisition, and thus, more grammatical accuracy and larger vocabulary” (p 21). The sheltered CBI approach makes the acquisition of language more accessible to students but the focus of the instruction is still on the content rather than on language.

Based on my observations of the students’ work, the way in which they interacted with each other in a focused and enthusiastic manner while staying on task in the L2, I was prone to think they would prefer content-based instruction over conventional ESL instruction in their other English-language courses, too. This was not the case as the questionnaire data revealed that, although the students viewed CBI very positively in my course, the large majority did not think that CBI is a good way to learn English in their other courses, although fewer than one-third supported it in some of their English courses.

The question, of course, is why. I surmise that the answer may lie with the students’ skepticism about whether they can effectively learn a language without some grammar instruction. In the questionnaire, students answered that they would prefer to have learned grammar in the Cross-Cultural Perspectives course. The range of preferences varied from a little to a lot but more than half of them indicated that they wish grammar had been taught in my class (#5). The preference for grammar instruction increased even more when they answered the question (#6) about what their preference would be for grammar instruction in their other classes.

The students’ answers present an interesting take on the role of CBI in a curriculum then. How much of a language curriculum should be content-based and how much should be dedicated to teaching the L2 deductively? I cannot assume which one is correct after teaching just one CBI course, but I am now aware that students’ perceptions need to be taken into account when making any curriculum change and that one cannot rely on instructors’ assumptions and beliefs about what is beneficial for students’ language learning.

Conclusion

This small study revealed that CBI was an effective instructional approach in motivating the students to learn and use the L2 in authentic and meaningful exchanges. The questionnaire data revealed that students found the course content both interesting and challenging. However, the study also showed that students were unsure whether they were ready to accept CBI as an alternative approach over the instruction of the L2 following a prescribed grammar curriculum. This data would indicate that the students in this study like CBI in second-language instruction but that many of them still prefer to learn English in their other courses which follow a prescribed language-learning curriculum characterized by a deductive approach to teaching.

References

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Appendix

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect research information about your participation in this learning activity. Your answers will be used for research purposes only. Select only one answer to each question.

1. Do you think your English improved as a result of completing this course?
 - a. Yes, it did.
 - b. Yes, it did some.
 - c. Yes, it did a little

- d. No, it didn't.
2. Did any of the following items make it easy for you to better understand the course content?
 - a. The teacher's lectures.
 - b. The reading handouts.
 - c. The vocabulary lists.
 - d. None of the above.
 - e. All of the above.
 3. Would you recommend this course to your friends as a way to improve their English skills?
 - a. Yes, I would.
 - b. No, I wouldn't.
 - c. I am not sure if I would.
 4. How interesting did you find this course overall?
 - a. I found it very interesting.
 - b. I found it interesting.
 - c. I found it a little interesting.
 - d. I didn't find it interesting.
 5. What would be your preference for grammar in this course?
 - a. A lot more grammar in this course.
 - b. Some more grammar in this course.
 - c. A little more grammar in this course.
 - d. No grammar in this course.
 - e. I have no preference.
 6. What would be your preference for grammar in your other English-language courses?
 - a. A lot of grammar in my other courses.
 - b. Some grammar in my other courses.
 - c. A little grammar in my other courses.
 - d. No grammar in my other courses.

- e. I have no preference
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- 7. Do you think that CBI is a good way to learn English in your English courses?
 - a. Yes, but only in this English course.
 - b. Yes, but only in some English courses.
 - c. Yes, in all of my English courses.
 - d. No, in none of my English courses.