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CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION- A METHOD OF DEVELOPING LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL COMPETENCES

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Abstract: *This paper examines Romanian students' attitudes towards several content-based instruction (CBI) workshops in English on topics such as leadership, human rights, successful women, violence and environmental protection. The purpose of this study is to show that CBI is not only an effective means of developing language skills, content-based knowledge, but also a very engaging and motivating way of enhancing civic and social competences such as justice, equality, non-discrimination, non-violence, tolerance and respect for human dignity. These workshops incorporated a blended approach which focused on analysis and discussion of critical subject matters that also engaged an interdisciplinary perspective. The conclusion is that by choosing topics that render both language and social competencies, the process of learning a foreign language (in our case, the English language) becomes more meaningful for the learners as the values they absorb will have a long-lasting impression on their overall education.*

Keywords: *CBI (Content-Based Instruction), language learning, content learning, civic skills, social competences*

1. Introduction

CBI is “the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material” (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche, 1989: vii). Within the EFL context in Romania, few papers have examined the reasons for using CBI and its effects. This paper aims to highlight the resourcefulness and effectiveness of this language teaching approach by examining several CBI workshops that were held at the American Corner in Tg. Mures, from 2018 until 2022. The workshops covered different topics such as leadership, human rights, successful women, fighting against violence and environmental protection.

After an introduction into CBI along with its advantages and potential problems, a description of the workshops' content and activities, as well as a discussion of the reasons why CBI should be part of language courses (mainly of ESP courses) follow. Reference is also made to students' response to the workshops on the basis of data collected through interviews and questionnaires, which were applied before and after each workshop. The conclusion is that CBI

is a meaningful and effective method that impacts both the language skills of the learners, their content-related knowledge, as well as their social and civil skills.

2. Content-Based Instruction

Content-based instruction (CBI) is “an umbrella term referring to instructional approaches that make a dual, though not necessarily equal, commitment to language and content-learning objectives.” (Stoller, 2008: 59)

According to Brinton *et al.*, CBI is a method that aims to combine the teaching of content with language teaching purposes, i.e. to “concurrently teach ... academic subject matter and second language skills.” (Brinton et al, 1989: 2)

CBI is in general associated with Canadian immersion programs. In the late 1980s, immersion became popular with the EFL/ESL teaching. Immersion is considered as “the quintessential model of content-based L2 instruction” (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013: 3). According to Tedick *et al.*, immersion involves the use of the additional language for at least 50% of academic instruction in primary school (Tedick *et al.*, 2011) or at least for several years in the curriculum (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013).

Swain and Johnson list some essential characteristics of immersion: “the L2 is the medium of instruction; the curriculum is the same as for L1; overt support exists for the L1; the program aims for additive bilingualism; exposure to the L2 mainly in the classroom; students enter with similar levels of L2; the teachers are bilingual; the classroom culture is that of the L1.” (Swain and Johnson, 1997:6-8)

According to Stephen Davis, CBI is “a teaching method that emphasizes learning *about something* rather than learning *about language*.” (Davis, 2003). He identifies three major models of CBI: a ‘sheltered model’- a content specialist and an ESL specialist work together (CBI is called “sheltered” because learners are given special assistance to help them understand regular classes); an ‘adjunct model’- the ESL teachers organize classes to prepare students for joining classes with L1 learners (these classes resemble EPA or ESP classes, which are focused on acquiring specific target vocabulary); and a ‘theme-based’ model, where a teacher teaches on the basis of the students’ own interests.

The content of the theme-based classes can be chosen from a wide variety of topics. The workshops that this article makes reference to followed this theme-based model as they approached topical issues such as leadership, successful women, human rights, fighting against violence, environmental protection. The students’ keen interest in these topics, as well as their dynamic involvement in the workshops stand as a proof for the effectiveness of CBI and recommend it as an essential method in the EFL/ ESL, as well as ESP curriculum design. The answers the students gave to the questionnaires and the interviews conducted before and after each workshop indicate that they left each workshop with enhanced knowledge about the topics, with better communication skills and with many inspiring ideas, which they were determined to share with their friends, colleagues, and their community. They also made suggestions for improvement and highlighted the necessity of organizing similar workshops in their school or at the university, as well as the need of informing and educating the community as regards the debated topics.

Both the above-mentioned characteristics of immersion and the three models of CBI reveal advantages, as well as problems that students and teachers may face when CBI method is used in the teaching process.

Some of the advantages of CBI are the followings: by using CBI, learning a language becomes more interesting and motivating. Learning about something that interests you gives the feeling that you fulfil a real purpose, increases your confidence and independence.

Students can also get a much wider knowledge of the world through CBI. Many times students have stated that they have resorted to sources of information in English and this has supported their educational needs. Moreover, the so-called generation C, the “digital natives”

who have integrated technology into every aspect of their daily routine, take most of their information in English. Therefore, CBI is a sturdy bridge that can connect the present profile of language learners with the language learning process.

CBI is also a very useful method for EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teachers as it may involve note taking, summarizing or extracting key information from texts, all these being essential skills for EAP classes. Moreover, these abilities can be transferred to other subjects. Interdisciplinarity is thus engaged and very valuable skills can be practiced and developed across many subjects, this interconnectivity making the entire educational process more effective and motivational.

ESP teachers should also consider CBI theme-based instruction, meaning that they should adapt the teaching materials and use more authentic texts that focus both on language and content learning objectives. Consequently, ESP assessment should cover both specific terminology and content; this can be effectively achieved mainly through continuous evaluation (quizzes, summary of content, comparative approaches, writing freely about a topic approached in the CBI, project presentation, etc.). The available ESP textbooks should be complemented with more thought-provoking CBI materials as the students can easily lose interest in the ESP course if there are few connections with the specific content and the related activities in their main field of study.

Another advantage of CBI is the fact that students have to take information from different sources, they have to analyze and restructure it and this way they develop their analytical and critical thinking. At the same time, working in teams for certain projects related to CBI improves students' collaborative skills. They can discover that they possess skills that they have not been aware of, such as presentation, organizational or leadership skills. The fact that they develop these skills gives them confidence and turns them into independent learners who will continue to have this proactive attitude towards learning throughout their entire life.

CBI can also reveal some drawbacks that the language teachers have to sort out by coming up with effective solutions. Thus, because CBI isn't explicitly focused on language learning, some students may have the impression that they are not improving their language skills. This can be solved by using language focused follow-up exercises that highlight linguistic features within the materials and thus they consolidate any difficult vocabulary or grammar issues. The teachers do not have to strike a neat balance between language and content, yet, the language learning objectives must also be achieved through specific-related practice (translation, matching exercises- words and their definition, fill in, error correction, rephrase, word-building, synonyms, antonyms, etc.).

Another problem that can occur is that sometimes students feel that it is easier to speak about the content in their mother tongue. The teachers should insist on the benefits of using the target language and should channel the debates accordingly.

As Swain and Johnson mentioned, one of the characteristics of immersion is that students enter with similar levels of L2. What generally happens in the case of ESP courses is that the main challenge faced by the ESP teacher is that the students enter the university with different levels of language proficiency. In this situation the CBI method may cause difficulties to the students with a lower level of language proficiency. However, the teachers can address this problem efficiently if they allow students to use texts in their native language and then get them to use the target language for sharing information and project presentation, or the other way around.

Another problem when using CBI is that students do not have the courage to express their own opinions and thus they feel more confident if they simply copy the content of the source text when they get information and include it in their presentation. This can be overcome if the teacher designs tasks that require students to evaluate the given information step by step, to draw some conclusions, to answer to questions that are based on the information from the

texts, or to perform some activities that put the information into practice. Controversial topics, pros and cons debates can be very useful and thought-provoking. Problem-solving tasks that can be assigned to be carried out individually or in teams are also ways of stimulating students' analytical thinking and developing their independence in the educational process.

3. The experience of CBI workshops on human rights, leadership, successful women, fighting against violence and environmental protection

The workshops organized by the American Corner of Tg. Mures from 2018 to 2022 are examples of how CBI can be a very effective method in achieving both language and content learning objectives. The participants signed up for the workshops because they found the topics interesting and they wanted to improve both their level of English, their communicational skills, as well as their knowledge regarding the themes of the workshops.

Generally, the participants were on the same level of English, had the same language and content needs and expectations, even though they belonged to different age groups (both high-school and university students, as well as university graduates). These workshops were examples of how extracurricular CBI activities can be organized around the linguistic and content needs of the participants. They also revealed the fact that CBI theme-based method can be more widely implemented in the school and university curriculum because of its two-fold benefits (language and content), to which we would add social and civic skills. Hence a greater flexibility of the curriculum is expected in order to suit students' interests.

The workshops were very challenging for the teachers as they had to identify issues and strategies for achieving language and content learning objectives, as well as developing social and civic skills. Yuko Butler warns about the difficulties of effectively implementing CBI, remarking that "one cannot assume that language acquisition takes place incidentally as long as meaningful content is provided." (Butler, 2005: 238) Hence, 'meaningful content' needs to be introduced within a linguistic framework that accommodates the needs of a specific group of students. According to Butler, Y, "CBI's efficiency depends on the program setting and the curriculum, the characteristics of teachers involved, the characteristics of learners, and the availability of resources." (Butler, Y, 2005: 231)

The workshops were extracurricular activities, so there were no constraints of a mandated curriculum and the teachers had the freedom of selecting teaching materials on the basis of the students' needs. Similarly, at least in the case of ESP programs within Romanian universities, there is no mandated curriculum that needs to be strictly observed; therefore, there are no constraints in terms of content-choice as long as this matches the main issues of the specialized field of study. The ESP teacher has to some extent the freedom (quite burdensome, but very rewarding) of selecting the ESP teaching materials that need to fit the learners' profile and their real needs.

The questionnaires applied at the beginning of workshops had a two-fold purpose: first of all, they were meant to identify students' needs and then to assess their knowledge regarding the main themes of the workshops. Developing communication skills in English was the main need of the participants; they also showed interest in the topics of the workshops and they suggested some themes they wanted to be integrated in the respective workshops as they want to learn more about them. The teachers adjusted both the content and the teaching methods so as to meet these requirements. The main goal was to support the students by engaging them in challenging & informative activities and thus help them learn complex skills. One main advantage of using CBI in these workshops was that the students were constantly motivated and interested in the language training. Learning happened almost automatically as the materials and methods that were used enabled them to make more connections to life situations. Thus, learning the language turned into a fun and easy activity and the information acquired was meaningful and long-lasting.

The content of each workshop was organized around its main topic: leadership, human rights, successful women, fighting against violence and environmental protection. The teachers decided that no textbooks can be used to fit the students' needs; instead, PowerPoint presentations, handouts and online materials were selected in order to match the language and content learning objectives. A pervasive objective for every workshop was developing social and civic skills. Civic skills are defined as "the abilities necessary to participate as active and responsible citizens in a democracy. They are necessary for critical thinking and collective action, and they include speaking, listening, collaboration, community organizing, public advocacy, and the ability to gather and process information." (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011)

The topics of the workshops were very giving from the perspective of developing social and civic skills. To name a few: developing leadership skills and being a team spirit in all areas of life, learning about human rights and the extent to which they are a reality for all, discovering examples of successful women and their remarkable contributions that set them as role-models, learning about painful issues such as domestic violence, its insidious forms and ways of fighting against it, finding facts about environmental protection and identifying ways of individuals' effective involvement in the action to protect our Planet.

The workshops encouraged in-class conversation, discussion, analysis, thus stimulating students' critical thinking. The focus was on fluency and the teachers organized the materials so that students would express their opinions in a more natural way. It was planned that the content used in every meeting would be made available to the students one week in advance, although, in practice, this was not always achievable. The content was tailored to the specific themes and the meetings included activities such as in-class discussion and role play activities, topic-related and level-specific handouts. In-class videos were also used as a means to enhance the effect of instruction and also to inspire and challenge the participants to make on-topic follow-up comments and to spark debates.

To exemplify, we will list some of the topics covered in two workshops: 'Say No to Violence' and 'Let's Go Green'. The first workshop 'Say No to Violence' included topics such as: Violence - myths and facts, Forms of violence, Violence against children in Romania, The influence of violence in the media on males, Workplace bullying, Gaslighting. The other workshop, 'Let's Go Green', covered topics such as: Fast fashion, How to save our Planet, Recycling, Saving water, Green fingers, Pollution, Urban garden, Energy resources, Energy security, Sustainable development. Apart from language development and content-related knowledge, the main outcome of these workshops was the fact that the students became more aware of the importance of these issues and realized that it is their duty to be informed and take a stand as active members of the society in relation to these problems. A law student that signed up for several workshops even decided to write her final paper on domestic violence and she appreciated the informative and formative character of the workshop 'Say No to Violence' from which she got her spark of inspiration. We also decided to transfer some of the materials that we used in the workshops to our ESP classes and thus we realized the great potential of CBI method in developing students' language and content learning skills. The same impact was achieved also in terms of developing social and civic skills. The university students realized the necessity of introducing these topics for their overall education as active and reliable members of the society. The only drawback about the implementation of CBI method was the differing levels of students in terms of their language proficiency. This can be overcome by adapting the content to the level of the students, by providing a translation of the content and then asking them to make their presentations or projects in English, as well as by organizing teams with different language levels. This way both the low-level and the higher-level students can benefit from this experience as the low-level ones can speed up their learning process and the high-level students can develop their organizational and teamwork skills.

4. Conclusions

The overall students' response to the CBI workshops was a positive one. The extra-curricular character of these activities and the fact these workshops were not imposed on the participants but were their choice, somehow freed their minds and they were more relaxed and willing to participate in the meetings. Moreover, they assumed an active role also in the design of the workshops as they were asked about their expectations before the start of each workshop. At the end of each workshop they had to give a feedback and make suggestions for improvement. Definitely there is room for improvement such as "approaching high-priority topics, developing academic skills and more explicit instruction regarding learning strategies that mediates a better understanding of the content" (Chamot and O'Malley's (1996) Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). Consequently, more research is required as regards both the creation of materials based on CBI, as well as their implementation in the educational process. The benefits of using CBI are obvious as learners appreciate the stimulating and interesting content. The fact that language is taught within discourse contexts, real-life context and not in isolated language fragments mediates a better connection with the language and what the students already know. Thus the students see the practical usage of the language and the transfer they need to make in the L2 becomes more natural.

"An excellent way of making progress in a foreign language is to use it for a purpose, so that the language becomes a tool rather than an end in itself." (Paul Holdsworth, 2001). Thus, integrating language and content in the process of teaching and learning is a priority of the European Commission as well because, by following the CBI approach, learners can not only increase their language proficiency, but, at the same time, they can become more effectively involved in an increasingly demanding academic and social environment and they, ultimately, can acquire the specific skills required in their future professions.

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