

Teaching Philosophy: Why I Made the Right Choice with CBI

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In the In the spring of 2013, I was starting a new job at Himeji Dokkyo University. The schedule was fairly standard for a new teacher: three communication classes, one writing class, one business workshop and five classes of English for non-English majors. Upon inquiring as to the content that should be prepared for the latter, I was told to choose something very easy, set my expectations low and not to be surprised or take it personally when students fail to attend. It was shockingly honest and direct advice from my superiors and colleagues. That being said, I am so happy I ignored it completely.

Brief Description of CBI

Content Based Instruction (CBI), also often referred to as Content Based Learning (CBL), is described as “the integration of content learning with language teaching aims” by Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989, p. vii). With CBI, the subject is the main vehicle and the language is the tool. H. D. Brown points out that CBI has “the potential of increasing intrinsic motivation and empowerment, since students are focused on subject matter that is important to their lives” (2007, p. 56). It seems quite logical for language to be described as a tool, and makes sense that language learners should implement it as such. In the traditional ESL classroom though, this is rarely the case.

In the CBI classroom, students will study a subject using the target language; for example, Japanese university students learning about American history in a classroom where the text, materials, discussions and instruction are primarily in English. The content syllabus is supported by a lexical and grammatical syllabus which incorporates language-learning targets parallel with the subject material.

With CBI, students are not simply studying language for language sake, a practice that is all too common in most classrooms and leaves learners with no practical application. As Snow, Met and Genesee note, “In the absence of real meaning, language structures and functions are likely to be learned as abstractions devoid of conceptual or communicative value.” (1989, p. 202). This really calls into question the motivation of most students in Japan to learn English. Perhaps this is why they are able to ‘speak about’ English, but unable to speak English; the former being exactly what they were taught to do. With these points in mind, these five classes seemed to be

an excellent opportunity to create a CBI classroom where students could use English to learn content relevant to their major area of study.

Implementation

When creating a curriculum built upon CBI methodology from the bottom up, these are some important factors to be kept in mind: What is the language ability of my students? What type of content should be taught? What is the theme of the content? How can I incorporate language learning? What type of text or other material do I need and is readily available? How will I assess content as well as language skill? Is my class being taught in connection with any other classes?

Given that my new job was to start in 2 months, realistic constraints seemed ready to make quick work of my goals of creating a CBI classroom. There was the need for a content curriculum and a parallel language learning curriculum, of which I needed three pairs for three different courses. I did not know the level of my classes, but was told they were low, even for a university.

One thing that was advantageous, each class was comprised of students with the same major: two classes of medical students, two of business and one of law. With the content chosen for me, the next thing to do was find suitable textbooks. Looking through some of them, I noticed that there was already a fairly straightforward curriculum for content and language already incorporated in each. Deciding to err on the side of caution, selecting elementary level texts for each course seemed like the safest option.

To compliment the text, videos and other visual and aural media were used. For their fifth class, medical students might have been given a modified newspaper clipping about the rise of diabetes in Japan, a set of discussion questions and put into groups to discuss the topic. After, students worked in these same groups to complete a vocabulary gap exercise, followed by a listening exercise detailing the use of an insulin pen. Next, students filled out a mock hospital report while watching a five-minute video about a patient going to the hospital and being instructed on the use of an insulin pen.

All exercises were carried out in English, with students being given a helpful phrase worksheet to study as homework

in the first class. Students were told to tape this page onto the inside cover of their book so that they would not lose it. If they were unsure how to effectively communicate during a group activity, they could simply open their book cover and choose from the list inside.

Grading was based exclusively on a weekly quiz grade of which there were 10, a mid-term exam and a final-exam, the exams each being cumulative. There were points given for correctly completing the in-class activities, which would be forfeited if a student were found to be speaking during class. Students were encouraged to bring dictionaries and use them in order to quickly close the gap of understanding regarding technical terms.

I will never forget the first time one of the other teachers saw the mid-term exam I was preparing for the students. I had just completed making the cloze listening section and was downstairs using the copy machine that could print in a booklet format. Being that this was a content class, and there were seven weeks of material to test on, it was about eight pages deep.

“You’re going to give them that? I hope you’re ready for a whole lot of zeros” were literally the words that came out of their mouth accompanied with steady head-shaking and rolling eyes. Two weeks later, 37 students from one of the medical classes took that test. Out of all the students, only four received failing marks, two received perfect scores, and the median grade of the class was 75.02%.

My supervisors were all very pleased with the results. Not only were grades decent, the amount of attrition among students was negligible. From the previously mentioned class, 37 students started, 35 finished, and 33 of those 35 received passing scores averaging around the same 75 percent average. Given the expectations of the university that half or more of the students would not see the course through to the end, and that out of the ones who did stay, only half of them might pass, the results of the CBI classroom speak for themselves. Within my five content classes, almost all students finished, with the majority of them receiving very decent scores on challenging material.

Reflections

After a full year at Himeji Dokkyo University, there was no comparison between my CBI classes, attended by non-English majors, and my classes where English language or education was the main focus, in terms of level of achievement. The expectation would be, students with high intrinsic motivation, English majors, would put more effort into their classes. After all, these students chose English as their major area of study. The students from other disciplines taking their required English classes, having very low intrinsic motivation for learning a language, should perform below the level of their English major counterparts. Looking at my class statistics shocked me: attrition of my English major students was almost half by the end of the year, while only about five percent of the non-English major students had left. Also, while the average final grade for English majors was just above passing, most non-English majors passed with a healthy margin.

Students who were motivated to learn English were barely getting by in a traditional English learning classroom, while they’re peers were not English majors were thriving. At the end of the semester when the class surveys were returned, many students from the CBI classes had made comments equating to ‘this class was difficult, but I think it is useful for my future’. From that point forward, I was sold on CBI.

References

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