# REFLECTIONS ON THE PLACE OF CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION IN A TERTIARY EAL PROGRAMME

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## Abstract

*This paper summarises the observations and reflections of a content-based (CB) practitioner and a language development (LD) specialist (also the researcher and the author of this article) on the use of content-based instruction (CBI) in a semester-long Graduate Certificate in English as an Additional Language (GCert EAL) Programme at a tertiary institution in New Zealand over a three-year period. Although the theme-based CBI model works well in combination with LD courses within the programme, there is an obvious need for regular attention to formal language features in the CB courses. The contention is that the sociocultural view of genre and the genre approach used in LD courses, in conjunction with student collaborations in the process of task-based learning, can serve as both a theoretical and a practical platform for successfully integrating grammar instruction into CB courses. Besides, creating a strategy for consistent collaborations between the teachers of the two suites of courses will enable the students to feel the positive results of the links within their programme of study.*

*Keywords: content-based instruction (CBI), theme-based model, content and language integration.*

## Introduction: Why reflections?

The rationale for choosing to write an article based on collaborative reflections comes from the wide range of available material about teacher research and reflective teaching (Burns & Richard, 2009; Burton, 2009; Farrell, 2001, 2007), which states that teacher reflection in different forms assumes thoughtful construction of practical knowledge and is therefore considered central to teacher learning processes. Writing is not only a strategy for documenting our thoughts. It is also a composing process, which actually involves reflection (Burton, 2005). Elbow (1994) observed that in the process of writing, it is possible to discover what you think and what you do not know.

Two specialists carried out reflections on the place of CBI in a GCert EAL programme: the CB practitioner and the LD specialist of the programme. The second is also the project researcher and the author of this article. We were guided by Moon's (2000) views that as a stage in experiential learning, reflection involves the following sequence: noticing a concern; clarifying or expressing the concern in

some form; responding to the concern; processing the response; and acting on the insights gained. In our context, that sequence translated itself as: the idea of exploring CBI in an EAL programme; the researcher reviewing the literature and positioning both reflective teachers in response, and designing a methodology of responding to the concern including investigative questions; carrying out our observations and collaborative reflections; and the researcher analysing the data, writing a report based on reflections including any modifications to the courses, and presenting ideas for further research. That was the framework that guided us through the project.

The methodology of processing our response included: weekly one-hour exchanges of observations of the learning going on in the CB sessions, collaborative analysis of teaching materials, lesson observations and reciprocal moderation of CB and LD assessments. The researcher transcribed the reflections and then used open-coding and textual analysis techniques (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) to analyse the transcribed qualitative data. This method aligns with Sandilowski's (1995) in nursing: Key storylines were identified in an attempt to understand everyday practices, and key words were underlined because they made "inchoate" sense (p. 373).

The key-word technique helped the researcher identify the following recurring themes: content knowledge, language development, focus on form/grammar/language skills, task-based teaching, and content and language integration.

Three investigative questions underpin the theorising of the reflections on the role of CB courses in a GCert EAL programme at a tertiary institution in New Zealand:

1. What do we do?
2. What are the advantages of having CBI in a tertiary EAL programme?
3. What are the challenges?

## What is CBI?

CBI – other names for which are language and content integrated instruction, content-enhanced teaching, foreign language medium instruction, foreign languages across the curriculum, or learning with languages – is a significant approach in second language acquisition (SLA) (Lasagabaster, 2008; Rodgers, 2006; Snow & Brinton, 1997; Stoller, 2004), designed to provide second-language (L2) learners with concurrent instruction in content and language.

Several definitions of CBI can be found in ESL literature. Davis (2003) defines it as "a teaching method that emphasizes learning about something rather than learning about language" (p.1). Duenas (2004) defines it as a paradigm "centered on fostering student competence in a second or foreign language while advancing in the knowledge of a subject matter" (p. 1). Swain (2000) terms it "collaborative

dialogue" (p. 97) as it integrates traditional lecturing and student interaction. Richards and Rodgers (2001) qualify CBI as "one of the Communicative Language Teaching spin-off approaches" (p.2).

The development of CBI goes back to the 1980s, when it drew on Mohan's (1986) argument that language should not be taught in isolation from content and that "authentic content provided the richest and most natural context for language teaching to occur" (Brinton & Holten, 2001, p. 239). CBI is now widely used in a variety of educational contexts all over the world (Crandall, 2004). The goal of CB courses is to provide a meaningful context for language teaching to occur in. The objectives are drawn from the language, content, and study skills needed in a particular academic context. The curriculum is content driven and delivery is largely based on written texts. Comprehensive input provided through content materials leads to language acquisition (Paltridge, 2004).

## CBI models

CBI is used in a variety of models: theme-based courses, adjunct/linked courses, sheltered subject-matter instruction, and second-language medium courses/language across the curriculum (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Crandall, 1993). Each of the models is purposefully designed to answer particular needs, and therefore has its own characteristics and applications.

Reviewing CBI models, Snow (2001) shows how different models constitute a continuum of shifting emphasis on content and language, with "content-driven" approaches being at one end of the continuum, and sheltered subject-area courses and "language-driven" approaches using content mainly as a springboard for language practice at the other end. CBI models that fall somewhere between the end points demonstrate more balanced approaches to students' content and language learning needs: content-and language-integrated courses, adjunct courses (Winter, 2004) and modifications of theme-based courses.

The CBI model usually found in ESL and EFL contexts is *the theme-based model* (Stoller, 2002). The content can be chosen from one subject area or from various topics of a general nature. Readings from textbooks, followed by vocabulary and comprehension exercises, and authentic materials from subject-specific source books, from the internet and media can be used. The goal is to assist learners in developing general academic language skills and skills needed to operate in a content-specific community through interesting and relevant content.

More recent variations of the theme-based model, called *sustained content-based instruction,* or *sustained-content language teaching*, involve efforts to integrate language and content learning in tertiary EAL classes. Pally (2000), Murphy and Byrd (2001), and Murphy and Stoller (2001) report case studies integrating *one* subject area into language classes over a semester. A set of case studies of CBI in

higher educational settings, compiled by Crandall and Kaufman (2002), demonstrate the evolution that initial models have undergone in various contexts.

## Theoretical foundations of CBI

CBI is based on three main theories of language: "language is text-and discourse-based", and therefore the focus of language acquisition is on meaning rather than form; "language use draws on integrated skills"; and "language is purposeful" (Davies, 2003, p. 208).

In the light of the first theory, CBI provides the most "contextualised language curricula" (Kasper, 2000) as information is derived from and used in discourse and texts.

In terms of the second theory, the skills of the target language in CBI are not separate from each other, but together are involved in all the activities: reading or listening and taking notes, reading and writing a summary.

The third theory also merits attention. Students of our programme have either academic or professional employment purposes besides the overall communication purpose. Because they concentrate on their goals, they show a lot of motivation. It is therefore important for EAL teachers to move beyond the functional English syllabus, to a content-rich curriculum that prepares EAL students for success in a further content area.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) see the theoretical importance of CBI in learner interaction with "authentic, contextualised, linguistically challenging materials in a communicative and academic context" (p. 4). These authors underline some basic principles of CBI: for successful language learning, the information needs to be perceived as interesting, useful and leading to a desired goal, and the teaching needs to be built on learners' previous experience. Challenging, informative activities keep students motivated and interested, which leads to greater connections between topics and helps students engage with the learning material and recall information better as a result (pp. 209-211). Therefore, teaching and learning approaches often include cooperative learning, whole language learning, literature-based teaching, task-based learning, and case studies (Snow, 1998), which increase attention to academic language and encourage development of thinking and study skills (Crandall, 1994).

## Benefits of CBI reported in the literature

A considerable number of studies have reported the benefits of CBI. We will mention only a few here. Adamson (n.d.) reports the results of teaching sociolinguistics in English to tertiary Japanese and Chinese students: the use of collaborative dialogue "has succeeded in ... raising the general class level of

comprehension and, significantly, lowering anxiety about interaction in class" (p. 1). Tsai and Shang (2010) found correlations between CBI and the reading comprehension of EFL sophomores majoring in English at a Taiwanese university. Some of the research on CBI outlines its long-term benefits (Kasper, 1997; Pally, 2000; Song, 2006), reflected in higher success rates in further studies.

Despite the positive effects, CBI has been found a controversial paradigm because teachers often lack specific linguistic knowledge to deliver a language focus (Lorenzo, 2007).

## The GCert EAL Programme (What do we do?)

The GCert EAL Programme, established in 2005, is a 60-credit, level 7 qualification consisting of two compulsory courses: Advanced Written English (AWE) and Advanced Spoken English (ASE), and two optional courses out of the following choice: Culture & New Zealand Society-1 (C&NZS-1), Culture & New Zealand Society-2 (C&NZS-2), Employment Language Studies (ELSs), English Language Studies (ELS), Business Writing in International Contexts (BWIC) and Employment in a Globalised World (EGW). Each course is worth 15 credits. The core courses have five contact hours per week each, and the electives have four. The minimum entry requirements are a Bachelor level qualification and an overall IELTS score of 6.5 or equivalent. The students aim at further tertiary study including post-graduate, or at professional employment. All the courses fall into two groups: LD or CB courses. The latter include C&NZS-1, C&NZS-2 and EGW. The LD courses integrate theoretical understanding of language systems and types of language analysis with practical language skills. The CB courses provide insights into areas of New Zealand culture or workplace.

About 60% of the CB class time is spent on *listening* to lectures and taking notes. Listening also happens during workplace and interviewing experiences. *Reading* is extensive. Weekly homework includes 10 to 30 pages from a textbook, a booklet of course readings, or from researched materials, with further independent reading required for assignments. *Writing* is given a special place, following Hyland's (2003) opinion that CBI can be effectively used to teach writing. The tasks require the students to focus on researching, synthesising, and interpreting the new input, on thinking critically and reflecting on their language, content or sociocultural learning. The *speaking* practice includes activities and types of speaking participation which are expected in mainstream tertiary study or in other communities of practice (COP).

However, in both speaking and writing, as a rule, there is a much stronger focus on *what* is said, or on the content of the utterance, than on *how* it is said, or on the accurate and appropriate use of language forms.

A focus on acquiring content-specific *vocabulary*, professional, academic and

jargon, is meant to ensure profound comprehension of subject matter content. This comes from extensive readings and teacher input.

An important focus of the CB courses is the development of *sociocultural skills,* in which a role is played by the choice of topics: the Treaty of Waitangi, the education system, the economy, the Green Movement in New Zealand, the Springbok tour for the cultural courses; talk and humour at work, organisational culture, health and safety, social networking for the employment courses. Many of the topics include a cultural frame or theory: the impact of globalisation, urban versus rural, feminism, Marxism, nationalism, which requires the application of analysing, evaluating, synthesising, comparing, and critiquing skills. The CB courses on culture contain a community placement and EGW contains a work placement component, the purpose of which is to authenticate the learning process by bringing the learner into close touch with their future COP.

## What are the advantages of having CBI on the programme?

The following is a summary of the analysis of the impact of the CB courses on the students and the programme.

First of all, our CB courses help students understand some of the basic aspects of how language is used in a COP, the EGW course mimicking the context of a workplace COP and the cultural courses mimicking the COP of mainstream cultural or social studies. As a result, the very presence of CB courses in the programme raises its face validity as our EAL students see its highest value in this close connection with life reality and in the opportunity to catch up with mainstream students' background subject knowledge and knowledge of the academic culture.

Secondly, in the delivery of the CB courses, much emphasis is placed on students' collaboration in the process of co-constructing knowledge. We feel that this approach to CB courses may be a transfer from EAL methodology. This thought finds confirmation in literature. Thus, Senior (1997) calls students' collaborations in CBI "bonded" groups (p.3), and Miller (2002) "communities of learners" (p.149). Adamson (n. d.) stresses that collaborative learning is a new study skill for CB classes as the expected mode of learning content is via lectures; so this shift from traditional lecturing to students' active participation encourages cognitive flexibility (Mohammed, 1997) – another offering of CBI, beneficial for students.

An important pragmatic factor in using student collaborations is our observation that those students who dislike speaking directly to the teacher more readily express themselves in groups of classmates. This is where the lowered anxiety in CB courses that Adamson (n. d.) reports may be coming from. There is little doubt that the lowered anxiety characteristic of group work enhances enthusiasm and

motivation as students become aware of their ability to verbalise their knowledge and to help each other. One more factor that adds to the overall motivational power of CBI for students is the challenge they face when working with authentic content and materials, which make learning more meaningful, purposeful, and situated (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989).

The emphasis on learner collaborations described above has sociolinguistic theory as its theoretical base. As the same sociolinguistic theory is the theoretical base for our LD pedagogy too, we could possibly exploit it more to bring the two groups of courses together into a more cohesive programme and to enable the students to see the two sets of courses as parts of an entity rather than in separation from each other.

Another theoretical platform for the presence of CBI in the programme and for links and collaboration between LD and CB courses is the recent development of sociocultural theory concluding that language, ethnicity and identity, which are key concepts of CBI, are integral to L2 learning (Franson & Holliday, 2009).

An analysis of the CBI model used on the programme has led me to believe that it does not completely align with any of the known CBI models. However, from the descriptions given above and also because each of the CB courses explores one content area simulating a mainstream university-level course, I conclude that what is being used on our programme is an approximation of the modification of the theme-based model called *sustained content-based instruction*. The content is given major prominence and the analysis of the reflective data raises the question whether the content is used sufficiently as a vehicle for language learning and in fact whether sufficient explicit instruction in language occurs for these courses to be classified as a variation of the theme-based model. This question is explored in the next section of this article. In the meantime, the use of an approximation of a model to answer the requirements of a particular context and learner type may be testimony to the fact that there can be models other than the generally recognised ones or their modifications already described in literature, testimony to the flexibility of CBI as an approach at tertiary level.

## Challenges in CBI

Several key issues, generic to CBI, arise in our particular context too. One is the role of the language teacher in relation to content, that is, whose job is it to deliver CB courses? Do language teachers have the expertise and confidence to teach subject-specific conventions or should these be left to subject specialists (Paltridge, 2004)?

Another issue is deciding on principles of selecting the content to include in CB courses. To what extent does the classroom content need to be guided by what is valued in the academic or professional community? One guiding principle for the

choice of materials on our CB courses has been the interests and needs of particular groups of students. However, the question remains to what extent we have been in line with the current trends in the related professional communities. There may be a need to correlate students' expectations of content to the actual expectations in the communities those students aim to become participants of.

And finally, the most important issue for us is the place of grammar in CB courses. Very often CB courses have a low focus on formal features of language. Brinton and Holten (2001) conclude that teachers are remiss if they do not meet the students' grammar needs and that CB curricula need to pay more systematic and principled attention to language instruction.

It is easy to notice how the students' low language proficiency levels cause them difficulty in understanding the required course readings and how lack of explicit attention to language form becomes an obstacle to faster development of language skills. The area in which the language proficiency deficiency comes out even more strongly is writing. As a result, in the course of this reflective project, to answer the needs of the learners, the content lecturer arrived at the decision to devote time to aspects of academic writing, particularly sentence-level grammatical issues – something previously not perceived as necessary in the CB courses of the programme. It is interesting to note how collaboration with the LD deliverer has changed the approach to the curriculum of the CB courses in an attempt to answer students' needs.

Aware of their slow language development, students themselves often explicitly state their need for more attention to grammar. Given this obvious need, why are we still failing to incorporate grammar work consistently into our CB courses? There could be two possible answers to this question. One relates to the challenge of finding an approach to grammar instruction appropriate for CB courses. The other one has to do with the difficulty of finding principles for selecting the grammar structures to focus on.

To answer the second question, the grammar structures can come from the reading or listening materials. They can also be determined by the students' language needs: either needs for their written tasks or by the needs identified in teacher feedback to written output. A new approach to curriculum adopted by the institution encourages student voices to be heard. The problem though is that students often have differing opinions about the amount and type of grammar instruction that they find useful. It is often the students' proficiency levels that appear to influence their expectations and preferences with regard to grammar instruction and it is the more proficient ones that are more often dissatisfied with their use of grammar (awareness is naturally an attribute of a higher level). This observation is confirmed by Brinton and Holten's research (2001). A further complication of this is that in our CB courses we have both international and New Zealand resident students, two groups whose L2 needs and expectations often

differ considerably.

My analysis of our reflections eventually led to the conclusion that modification of the CB courses involving systematic integration of grammar would be necessary and appropriate for several reasons. Firstly, the rich language context provided by CB reading and listening materials offers potential for effective grammar instruction. Secondly, the only way to comprehend and convey content is through language. Our primary job therefore is to teach language, and the reason our students are in our courses is their need of higher language proficiency.

A two-fold approach to grammar instruction in the CB courses appears appropriate: through work on errors in students' output and through focusing on form in tasks based on text content.

One of the main challenges however is *how* to focus on language form in an effective way given the need to focus also on content and on study skills within a limited time. Compliance with SLA research means drawing learners' attention to linguistic form without isolating it from its meaningful context (Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2004; Ellis, 2009). Therefore, close-ended information exchanges within collaborative activities aimed at fulfilling a meaningful task can serve this purpose. In fulfilling such tasks, learners have to pull together their resources to reconstruct a text or to resolve a problem. Segments of learner interaction in which they negotiate the use of a linguistic form needed to carry out a given task are called Language-Related Episodes (LREs) (Leeser, 2004). In LREs learners often question the meaning or the correctness of a grammatical form. Thus LREs indicate to the learner the gaps in their interlanguage. This kind of attention to form helps the students understand the relationship between form, meaning and the function of the form in the context of a meaningful task in the course of their collaborative work on it.

It is logical to suppose that learners' language proficiency will influence the types of LREs that arise in a collaborative task. Leeser's (2004) research revealed that the proficiency of the dyad members and the groupings of students by their relative proficiency (high-high, high-low, or low-low) affected how much the dyads focused on form, the types of forms they focused on as well as how successful they were at resolving the language problems they encountered during a passage reconstruction task in a CB course.

As the majority of CB lessons should be task-based, the described way of attending to form can be effective for raising the learners' language proficiency.

A strong platform for such a task-based approach across the curriculum of programmes like ours can be provided by the study of genre features that goes on within the LD courses as those will help determine the language focus needed for fulfilling certain tasks: essays, reports, job applications and others. This is an

opportunity for both form-function matching and the use of grammar to achieve the fulfilment of a task. However, research is needed to confirm the benefit of this approach for combined CB/LD tertiary learners and to explore how it could be best implemented.

Research will also have to answer several more detailed questions related to the use of student collaborations when fulfilling a task in our CB courses. Firstly, what would be a sufficient number of tasks for students to resolve collaboratively in order to ensure the occurrence of LREs? Secondly, have the students really been encouraged to develop a "culture" of paying attention to form when fulfilling those collaborative tasks and what are the ways of developing such a culture? Thirdly, do Leeser's findings regarding the pairing of students for collaborative tasks, which have such clear pedagogical implications overall, apply to a tertiary EAL programme combining LD and CBI?

## Developing a collaboration strategy

How can coordination of instruction and assessment, and collaboration between content and language instructors on an EAL tertiary programme consisting of two distinct strands be best provided in order to fully answer the students' needs? I contend that an overall strategy for such collaboration must be developed. It should include a focus on the following: both the LD and the CB staff's familiarity with the content, assessment and resources of both the strands in order to streamline the curriculum and assessment; the use of an identical approach to integrating the theoretical component into the courses, of appropriate types of language analysis and of the same meta-language across the programme; the development of reflective and critical thinking skills; and the use of formal language properties in task fulfilment.

One example of the need of such a strategy is in the area of course design, curriculum content and assessment. While both the strands have what is now called "democratic" assessment items, such as performance-based, ongoing portfolios and projects, it is only the LD courses which have timed class final exams too. In the meantime, final exam results could be a good indication of the learners' achievement as an outcome of performance on the CB courses too. They would be meaningful for the learner in the first place.

Another application of the collaboration strategy arises from the fact that the LD courses feature a clear genre-based approach. For example, the Advanced Written English portfolio includes pieces of writing in a variety of genres following their schematic structures and using language features characteristic of these genres: essays, reviews, genres of professional and civic writing. If genre distinctions were reinforced in the CB courses, the study of genre would acquire an even more real-life meaning to the learners, particularly given the cultural component present in the notion of genre. However, research is needed to give answers to questions

on the usefulness of the same assessment types and on the use of a more focused approach to genre analysis in CB courses.

There are certain aspects and elements of the two strands that could serve the students' needs better if coordinated in the framework of the new strategy. For example, as pointed out before, the CB courses come closest to authentic contexts of the related communities of practice. The portfolios of the LD courses have been developed for the same purpose and so have become parts of LD closest in nature to the CB courses. What benefits could the students gain from such a similarity in the nature of the two aspects of their work? This can be one of the questions that research could be asked to answer.

A further question relates to the use of several types of text analysis across the programme. Does this impact the learners in a good or bad way? A glossary of linguistic terminology has been compiled and is in use across the programme. However, what purpose does the variety of text analysis approaches pursue? Would one approach not be sufficient for the development of critical engagement with a text?

The application of the collaboration strategy between courses on the programme should lead to the important sociological concepts of norm, values, status, cultural dislocation, ethnicity, or issues of globalised employment, which are the subject of acquisition in CB courses, being integrated into written and spoken texts or assignments in the LD courses. Again, research will answer the question about the impact this will have on learners' success.

Another question for further research to answer is how collaboration between the two sets of courses could foster the development of effective learning strategies. What cognitive, linguistic and social strategies can ensure a balanced acquisition of content and language skills on a tertiary EAL programme with CBI?

In many instances, particularly in assessments, it can be difficult to "separate conceptual understanding from linguistic proficiency" (Crandall, 1993). Does this mean that there is the danger that CBI can assist in fossilising learners' flaws in language use? What is the right balance between language and content within CB courses as well as between CB and LD courses for the learners' successful advancement in both the content and the language areas and is this balance measurable?

## Conclusion

The data collated in the course of this study via collaborative teacher reflections aimed at answering three investigative questions on the use of CBI within a tertiary EAL programme. The following three points summarise an attempt to answer the investigative questions.

*1. What do we do?* The evidence obtained via the described reflections shows that the programme uses a modification of the theme-based CBI model, called sustained content-based instruction, which allows close integration of content and language objectives within CB courses.

*2. What are the advantages of having CBI in a tertiary EAL programme?* My analysis of the data testifies to the usefulness of CBI in a tertiary EAL programme as adult students value courses linked to their real-life future challenges. I evaluate CBI as a motivating and anxiety-lowering teaching model, which leads to students acquiring ownership of their learning process. An increase of learner motivation is observed when students are learning about something rather than just studying language, and authentic content and materials make learning more meaningful and purposeful.

One of the major benefits of employing CBI in combination with LD courses on tertiary EAL programmes is the opportunity to use sociolinguistic theory as a common platform for the two sets of courses to complement each other and to build a cohesive entity rather than to be seen by students in separation from each other.

*3. What are the challenges?* In programme and course design, and in delivery, instructors should consider their content, linguistic and study skills development objectives, and there can be a problem if the teacher is too concerned with the content area and neglects teaching related language skills. Systematic integration of focus on language form is necessary, as the main purpose of CBI, particularly its theme-based models, is to enhance English language development through content areas, not content learning per se and so the language learning aspect should take equal priority with the content learning one. However, decisions are needed on how to integrate a focus-on-form approach into CB courses. An answer to the challenge can be a task-based approach across the curriculum of the programme with the use of LREs for students to resolve collaboratively. However, research is needed to confirm the benefit of this approach and to explore how it could be best implemented.

Among the issues of CBI integrated into a tertiary EAL programme is a clear need for developing strategies for ongoing collaborations with LD courses' deliverers, and task-based teaching in conjunction with genre studies based on the socio-cultural view of genre can serve as the theoretical and practical base for such collaborations.

In conclusion, I believe that the ultimate place of CBI in tertiary EAL teaching is still to be identified by research. There is a need to evaluate the overall effectiveness of CBI combined with LD courses in a tertiary context, to specify optimal conditions for its use and the use of various instructional and assessment strategies, and to find a perfect fit between content and language components, the right proportional distribution of time between LD and CB courses.

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