

ACQUIRING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH CONTENT-ENRICHED INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT. Content-enriched instruction (CEI) is a methodological approach that intends to facilitate language learning by focusing instruction on the acquisition of knowledge about culture and real-life information rather than on language *per se*. This approach is a variation of content-based instruction, a methodological paradigm designed to meet the requirements of students who need to acquire language command as well as academic content. Increasingly, however, CBI and CEI are being used in general language courses with no content-specific objectives besides enhancing the quality of instruction. This article proposes to use culture as subject-matter content for teaching English with the aim of assisting students in increasing their cultural knowledge while developing language skills and acquiring familiarization with formal language and discourse features. To support this proposal, the foundations of CBI and CEI are explored, and the decision-making issues for selecting content are described. And to illustrate the model, a CEI syllabus is outlined and one particular section described.

The role of culture in ELT

The transmission of cultural information by means of language teaching practices and materials is an issue of wide interest among theorists and practitioners in the field of English language teaching. This concern with the conveyance of cultural dimensions along with the language teaching and learning processes has generated some debates so as to establish 'what kind of English' and 'whose English' should be taught internationally, depending on the learners' particular socio-cultural contexts and circumstances. One of the tendencies has been a proposal to 'de-culture' teaching practices and materials in order to deprive the language taught from any cultural or ideological implications that may transfer 'alien' or 'inappropriate' cultural references which could be perceived as potentially dangerous for the cultural integrity of the learners. For this purpose, International English has emerged as a 'sterilized' alternative in order to avoid the exclusive Anglo-American perspective which is perceived in some contexts as an ethnocentric and elitist imposition when established –consciously or unconsciously— as the only pattern for valid linguistic and cultural standards. A number of concepts associated with the threats of Anglo-American cultural dominance such as 'ideological colonization', 'cultural alienation', 'linguistic imperialism', and 'cultural indoctrination' have been defined. These definitions seem to agree with the ideas of Modiano, for whom

'The teaching and learning of a geographically, politically, and culturally 'neutral' form of English, which is perceived as language of wider communication and not as the possession of native speakers, is one of the few options we have at hand if we want to continue to promote English language learning while at the same time attempting to somehow

'neutralize' the impact which the spread of English has on the cultural integrity of the learner'.

Modiano (2001: 344)

An international language is thought to be one that is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another. Moreover, as McKay points out referring to some approaches to EIL, 'If an international language, by definition, means that such language belongs to no single culture, then it would seem that it is not necessary for language learners to acquire knowledge about the culture of those who speak it as a native language' (McKay 2000:7).

There are, however, other contrasting opinions that consider culture learning as an optimal tool for promoting cultural awareness and intercultural understanding rather than a potential danger for the learners' cultural integrity (Barrow 1990, Clarke & Clarke 1990, McKay 2000). According to these postulates, by excluding references to real domains of language use in ELT practices and materials, we are doing a disservice to the students, as their knowledge about the actual dimension of the English language and its speakers in the world is openly distorted. Contrarily, by offering language instruction consistently interwoven with a variety of cultural references, we would provide learners with a most valuable and rational approach for their intellectual and cognitive development without risking their language acquisition. The introduction of culture in the foreign language practice can provide an accurate framework of information and knowledge about the different English-speaking communities in the world and about the role of culture in communication. Hence 're-culturing' teaching materials in a consistent, balanced and significant manner, instead of de-culturing them intentionally, would have positive implications on the students' academic and personal outcomes, for this will assist them in increasing their literacy and promoting their cultural understanding.

Providing cultural information in the context of the language classroom may consequently assist students in developing cultural awareness and abilities for understanding foreign cultures, and diminish the possibilities of getting involved in cultural misunderstandings when interacting with members of other cultures. For this purpose, a careful selection of cultural information should be carried out and organized so as to avoid restricted, mono-cultural perspectives. The desirable condition would therefore be based on the achievement of a comprehensive, balanced organization of the cultural connotations focused on a distribution of the interest among the different spheres and contexts in which the English language is used in the world, keeping in mind that, as Carter & Nunan state in their *Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*, 'English no longer belongs to the United Kingdom, nor to the United States. It is an increasingly diverse and diversified resource for global communication' (Carter & Nunan 2001:2). By doing this, the ethnocentric and elitist connotations previously mentioned would be limited whereas, on the other hand, a richer and wider perspective would be attained. Moreover, the general cultural content would offer a meaningful, plural perspective in its scope, and a closer view of the current role of English considering its worldwide presence and the diversity of its users as first, second, and foreign language speakers.

There are some uncontroversial factors, however, —such as the geographical accessibility, the educational tradition, and the powerful publishing industries— that have shaped for decades the methods and patterns of teaching most commonly used in Europe and in some other parts of the world such as the Middle-East and Africa. In the particular case of Spain, the country in which I teach, it is true that students —as many other European ELT

learners—commonly have more chances to interact with members of the UK or with other Europeans rather than with citizens from other English-speaking areas outside Europe. Under these circumstances, a familiarization with the British cultural and social perspective could be justified for practical purposes. However, if we consider the more open, humanistic goals involved in the process of learning a foreign language aside from its immediate, instrumental purposes, the validity of this argumentation is not so uncontroversial. By excluding references to other domains of language use in ELT practices and materials, a disservice to the students is made, as their knowledge about the real dimension of the English language and its speakers in the world is not accurate. By contrast, if we offer language instruction interrelated with cultural references and contents that can provide a framework of information and knowledge about the actual English-speaking world, we would equip learners with substantial potential for fostering their intercultural knowledge and communicative capability without 'sabotaging' their language acquisition.

The interest and convenience of learning about English-speaking communities other than standard British and U.S. have been frequently debated in my classes. All the students share a long experience in using the same kind of learning materials, and seem to have developed a similar degree of tedium and lack of interest with regard to the background content commonly contained in their textbooks. This is the consequence of having been exposed for almost a decade to the same, recurrent fashion of presenting the users of the English language and their contexts either with a 'British-centric' perspective or by means of a consciously unidentified depiction. The positive, even eager feedback received from my students when offered the possibility of being exposed to other cultural orbits and situations has been one of the main reasons that have encouraged and propelled the project of designing a more varied, culturally-centred thematic syllabus.

Among the different approaches for language instruction that may offer possibilities for integrating culture in a systematic, coherently-structured manner, Content-enriched Instruction (CEI) is perceived as an optimal model as it offers the appropriate methodological foundations for teaching language through (cultural) content by using materials derived from a variety of sources.

Why content-enriched instruction?

Content-enriched Instruction is not exactly a new methodology, but a variation of Content-based instruction, this model being, for its part, 'a logical extension of proficiency-based curriculum designs' (Leaver & Stryker 1989:270). Experiences using CBI have been commonly used in immersion programs in Canada from as far back as the early sixties. The approach started being widely used in the United States in the eighties, both at school and university levels. At primary and secondary school levels, it has been put into practice within integrated curricula in the form of 'shared' subject-teaching in bilingual and immersion programs, as well as, increasingly, in Foreign Language courses. At college level, it is extensively used within the framework of English for Academic Purposes with the twofold objective of developing students' academic language ability and facilitating the transition to higher level, subject-specific courses (Dupuy 2000). A detailed account of recent work in the different areas is included in Snow (1998). In Europe, the approach is widely used under the generic denomination of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), and different experiences have also been reported (Marsh & Langé 2000).

In general terms, CBI is defined as an instructional approach in which language proficiency is achieved by shifting the focus from the learning of language *per se* to the learning of selected discipline content or subject matter. In Wesche & Skehan words' (2002:220), CBI 'refers to the integration of school or academic content with language-teaching objectives'. The benefits of this approach have been appreciated in different dimensions: it has been pointed out, for instance, that high levels of competence can be reached in classrooms where the target language is a medium of communication rather than an object of analysis (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991). Moreover, by integrating language and subject matter learning, students are offered the opportunity of participating more and using the target language with less pressure, acquiring self-confidence, and a starting point for higher work and cognitive demands. CBI also has positive implications for the development of the students' reading skills, and the approach also seems to have a beneficial impact on motivation and interest, as these come in part from the recognition that '(1) one is actually learning, and that (2) one is learning something valuable and challenging that justifies the effort' (Dupuy 2000:207).

CEI is a modified variation of CBI in which the academic content that is central to CBI is replaced by meaningful cultural information. In CBI, the subject-matter content is commonly linked to other disciplines or subjects related to the educational curriculum or associated with the particular academic spheres of the study area. In this way, mathematics, geography, history or sociology syllabuses, to name just a few, are used not only to develop subject knowledge but also to advance language learning. In CEI, however, there is no specific-discipline content involved: it is an extensive use of culture and real-life information that is used as a background for fostering both language competence and content knowledge. This cultural information, and not a regular subject syllabus is, as Ballman states, what 'drives the linguistic, structural, lexical, cognitive, and affective needs of the learner' (Ballman 1997:174). It could therefore be said that the difference between CBI and CEI lays on the selection of content type rather than on methodological foundations or procedural applicability.

Designing a content-enriched course for advanced learners of English

With the aforementioned ideas in mind, a CEI English course has been designed for advance-level students enrolled in the second year of the English Studies degree at the University of Murcia (Spain). The course goals and organization have been carefully reviewed so as to gather the materials that best fit the course guidelines and demands. The course is extended along a complete academic year, which expands over thirty weeks, each one offering three class sessions. So as to establish a balanced progression, the content has been distributed into six thematic blocks, each one centred on a general issue: (1) Colonialism, Post-colonialism and Language Spread; (2) Migration in English-speaking Countries; (3) Multiculturalism, Language and Identity; (4) Language Issues in the English-speaking World; (5) Education and Language, and (6) Language in Intercultural Encounters. With the aim of embodying a diverse range of genres, styles and voices, an attempt has been made to find selected passages of oral and written discourse from a variety of sources including academic publications, general information magazines, websites, audiovisual broadcastings, contemporary fiction, informative brochures, commercial films, etc.

The thematic areas have been selected keeping in mind both curricular and student-related parameters. Key factors such as the course purposes as well as the students' social, cultural and educational contexts have been therefore taken into account when designing the

project. According to the curricular parameters, the course aims are twofold, as students must acquire the language knowledge and develop the skills necessary for enabling them to cope successfully with both the requisites of the academic courses as well as with the communicative situations demanded at advanced level in general social contexts. Considering this, a balanced combination of discourse samples, type of contents, and language use that may be of relevance for both academic and real life interests has been outlined. Moreover, the course has been designed with the intention of offering cultural information that is bound to match the students' academic interests as they deal with some issues that will be addressed in-depth in the upper-level courses in the areas of culture, literature, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, etc.

Regarding the students' personal, educational and social dimensions, it has been taken into account that, with extremely occasional exceptions, all learners, although fairly proficient in English, come from monolingual and monocultural Spanish families and social contexts. Thus, issues such as multiculturalism, bilingualism, immigration, de-colonization, etc. have been purposely chosen so as to offer students a new, mostly unknown perspective of how language and culture are transferred, spread, adopted, reproduced and evolved globally. By doing so, it has been considered that exposing students to the real dimension of the English language all over the world will not only ease their transition to academic disciplines in English, but also provide a key cultural background for the understanding of real life dimensions, as different contexts in which the language is used are introduced, and situations that led to those circumstances contemplated.

Five related sections have been designed for every thematic block, introducing each one of them a different oral or written passage associated with the main issue, and so offering different content perspectives, discourse samples, and varied possibilities for language practice. An example of how the different sections have been integrated in the thematic spheres can be appreciated in the organization of the block on MULTICULTURALISM, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY. Under this generic name, five sections are included: (1) 'The US-Mexico Border' (an excerpt from an academic article about the Borderlanders' culture and identity); (2) 'Aboriginals in Australia' (a recorded interview in which an aboriginal woman describes her childhood experiences); (3) 'Multicultural Britain' (a passage from Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*); (4) 'I have a dream' (a recorded and written excerpt from Martin Luther King's famous speech), and (5) World Englishes (a passage from David Crystal's book *The English Language*).

For each particular passage, the language dimension has been carefully addressed so as to generate activities for offering students the necessary linguistic exploitation. This has been approached with two aims in mind: offering students possibilities for developing their language skills, and helping them detect and learn formal and discourse features at advanced level. Thus, reading and listening activities for processing the cultural content, and writing and speaking exercises and tasks to generate response and feedback to the input have been designed so as to activate and enhance the students' competence. Opportunities for the presentation and practice of language formal features and discourse strategies have also been integrated using the cultural content as a context for language reflection. The exploitation of each one of these individual passages is designed to take three class-sessions, the first one being focused on the understanding of the passage, the second one on the language exploration, and the third one on the production of written or oral output. Students will have to work through the three 60 minute-periods approaching comprehension with different reading or listening techniques, appreciating the language used as well as the writers' or speakers' register, tone, intention, attitude, etc., and

producing as required oral or written answers or pieces of discourse that will not only show their language command but also confirm their understanding of the issues presented and the attitudes these have generated in them.

Following this pattern, different topics and perspectives associated with a number of contexts in which English is used are introduced, facilitating culture treatment in a plural, non-ethnocentric way. Although the activities proposed for each one of the sections are primarily intended, as previously stated, to develop language skills and knowledge, the additional cultural learning objective is simultaneously activated by providing students with cultural topics that should advance their knowledge and promote their critical thinking. Both language and content are therefore harmonically integrated for the benefit of the students' linguistic and cultural enrichment.

The CEI syllabus described above has been devised to meet the requirements of a particular group of students under specific circumstances. Topic selection in CEI can nevertheless be as variable as demanded by the students' proficiency level and academic needs, the curricular context, and the personal and educational purposes. As the input is bound to be selected from a variety of sources, the flexibility of the program is extreme and the opportunities for language exploitation countless: the design of activities can be purposefully addressed to promote general English competence or to advance the particular improvement of selected skills; vocabulary acquisition can also be oriented towards selected general or specific areas, and language awareness as well as formal and discourse features learning can be focused on discriminated items with the desired emphasis. And what is more, the successful content integration may pave the way not only to improve the learners' linguistic competence, but also to provide valuable information for enhancing their cultural knowledge, preparing them for academic work, and developing confidence to interact with speakers of English all over the world.

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