

Content-Based Instruction in context of Language Acquisition in EFL Classroom: An Exploration

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Abstract: The effectiveness of teaching the English language using the subject matter in a classroom where English is taught as a foreign language is supported by a practical way of teaching in order to achieve quality education. The use of content-based instruction approach provides an innovative and efficient method for teaching English language skills to EFL learners in opposition to the traditional learning environment. Introducing content-based language teaching in the EFL classroom would be more helpful in improving the learners' language proficiency. The aim of this paper is to determine whether the implementation of content-based instruction (CBI) in teaching other courses in an English language graduation degree program would be more conducive for the students in the development of their linguistic skills and how the learners can get more advantages out of it. This study proved that applying CBI approach is the best practical way to promote the development of higher English language proficiency and provide Saudi learners with more opportunities for exposure to the English language.

Index Terms- language teaching, course content, EFL learners, teaching approaches, Content-Based instructions

I. INTRODUCTION

Content-based Instruction (CBI) is taken into account to be one among the foremost effective teaching techniques in EFL classroom when implemented with positive attentiveness. Content-based Instruction is defined as "the teaching of language through exposure to content that is interesting and relevant to learners" (Brinton, 2003). Since English has been a medium of instruction in several majors like medicine and Engineering, and therefore the mean of communication in business within the education program in Saudi Arabia, the fundamental step is to place emphasis on English language teaching in all fields to satisfy the requirement of the labor market. The universities in Saudi Arabia aim to provide special opportunities within the field of learning language and translation in line with the higher education standards with the intention of preparing students' active

participation within the country's economic, social and cultural development.

There are many challenges faced by students during their learning process while learning a new language, as they are required to write down the exam and answer the questions in a language they are still learning instead of writing in their native language, leading to fear of failure or achieving low GPA. When the students are registered within the graduate program, they enter at a beginning level usually with low proficiency in English language which is the second language for Saudi students. There they encounter many difficulties in learning language skills, specifically, communication skill which becomes an obstacle to interact with language teachers if they happened to be non-natives. One among the dominant reasons for this shortcoming, possibly lies within the school curriculum that has the English language course at the upper grade of the primary level, and in particular, the course is taught using bilingual medium of instruction in classroom where mainly grammar-translation method are adopted that distracts the students from focusing on the target language. Taking into consideration this pathetic situation, and therefore, the demand of the day, the ministry of Education has undertaken the responsibility for planning and implementing language policies in public and private schools. Alotaibi (2014) remarked that in all public schools, the EFL is taught four times per week as a mandatory subject from the sixth grade of elementary school. At present, Saudi Arabia is striving to do the best in various fields; such as education, economy, trade, and commerce, where language proficiency is the key factor. In most of the Saudi colleges, many English language instructors are non-native English speakers who use only English language as a medium of instruction. As the learners have become habitual to studying the subject matter in their native language, they expect their teachers to give instruction either bilingually or in their native language, Arabic. However, an instructor in the CBI setting needs to consider the desired balance between the language and the content. Though, in an EFL setting, a foreign language might be taught without translating or utilizing the learner's native language if the meaning has to be

conveyed directly through demonstration and action (Richards & Rodger, 1986).

II. THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF THE STUDY

A. *The EFL Learners*

The EFL learner is the one who is learning English as a foreign language in a region where English is considered as a second or foreign language either in the learner's home country or where the mother tongue is not English. In Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language, not an official language, hence, the exposure to the English language outside the institution is very limited, resulting in students' entering into the University with the low level of language proficiency. It is very disappointing to find the majority of students unable to express themselves even at the level of completing graduate programs.

B. *The EFL Classroom*

As the CBI approach for language learning has gained much popularity now, there are some critical factors that assist in implementing this method in many educational settings. For instance, the learning environment, the understanding level of students, and the program curriculum are equally accountable for the attainment of the required learning. It's always been the fundamental objective of a teacher to prepare an effective learning environment for the learners to bring about the desired behavioral changes in them. For the efficient teaching-learning process, the teaching techniques also play an influential role in the achievement of quality learning.

There are many factors that affect the EFL learning environment, for example, the learners' social background, the community they live in, their culture, religion, teaching and learning practices, and the learners' primary language – Arabic. Adopting the mother tongue as the language of instruction in the EFL classes has a distinctly negative impact on learning a foreign language. The bilingual medium of instruction in teaching doesn't allow the students to practice speaking English in or outside the classroom, insomuch as the language interaction in classroom is very significant in an EFL context, hence putting Saudi EFL learners to insufficient exposure to English language. Earlier, in Saudi Arabia English was regarded only as an academic subject since most Saudis communicate in their native language, Arabic, with their family, peers, friends, and teachers, resulting in obtaining very few opportunities for students to utilize the English language through day to day interaction. Some considerable factors, such as the economic situation of the learners and their parents' education that obstruct the learning process, are beyond the bounds of both the teacher and the students. The more interaction with a language produces better

learning. In that event, students need to practice their language through more articulation of their ideas rather than merely memorizing the contents from the prescribed textbooks that 'consisted of statements of abstract grammar rules, lists of vocabulary, and sentences for translation' (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Usually, foreign language teachers 'rely on textbooks to prescribe increasingly challenging linguistic content and thus are usually not experts at gauging how to bring learners to higher levels of content and linguistic sophistication by themselves' (Cammarata, 2010). In the Grammar-Translation approach, the instruction is given in the native language (L1) of the students with little use of target language (L2), ending in the inability of students to use the language to have effective communication outside the classroom. On the other hand, the direct approach of teaching does not allow the use of students' L1, focusing on L2 of the learner. In content-based Instruction, the students can find plenty of activities to get real exposure to the L2. Regarding the teaching and learning practices in Saudi colleges, Liton (2012) supported the positive effect of a longer exposure on learning English as a foreign language, and recommended that English courses should be introduced in primary schools which may 'perceptibly progress the quality of English learning within the Kingdom'.

C. *The EFL program*

In Saudi colleges, the goal of the English program is to provide a good learning environment and enhance the practice of English language. As the program specification requires, the program concentrates on language skills, allocating the first two years of the program for teaching language skills. At the third year, other introductory courses of literature, Linguistics and translation are studied which goes to advanced level in the fourth year. Teaching a language through course content is considered to be very effective where the learners develop high level of language proficiency and achieve desired level of content learning as well. The 'content' can be interpreted as using the subject matter as a source for teaching a second language. It also promotes student-centered approach which facilitates the process of teaching and learning and where students are highly motivated to be active participants in trying to understand the subject matter and later expressing the idea in their own words, which also boosts their confidence level. On the contrary, with the traditional method of giving lectures on a subject, students are found to be mere observant and passive listeners in the classroom. In CBI, the focus is on language acquisition using the content as the source material; therefore, the content has to be interesting and relevant so that its integration into language classes would better meet their needs (Howard, 2006).

With respect to the achievement of desired learning outcomes by the program, it is inappropriate to focus more on language acquisition and ignoring the subject matter which is primarily

required by the course learning outcomes, as Krashen(1985) specifies that students get credit only for their language learned, instead of being tested on subject matter. Cammarata (2010) mentioned that ‘teachers are only one link in the chain of change and that the CBI’s call for curricular reform will succeed only if important school-based reforms are in place to support teachers. Such reforms will need to acknowledge teachers’ agency and rights to appropriate’.

Richards & Rodgers (1986) asserted his points regarding the role of instructional materials within a method or instructional system that will reflect decisions concerning the primary goal of materials, such as, ‘presenting course content and practicing on it, may facilitate communication between learners, or enable learners to practice content without the help of the subject teacher’.

Nevertheless, some course content used in the curriculum of the degree program in Saudi Arabia is a matter of great concern. In selecting the subject matter, the diversity of the sources, the accuracy of the information of various viewpoints, instructional appropriateness, and students’ interest also need to be considered (Howard, 2006).

D. The Models of Content-Based Instruction

The philosophy of content-based instruction (CBI) aims at empowering students to become independent learners and continue the learning process beyond the classroom (Leaver & Stryker, 1997). In one of his books, he discusses some of the commonly used models of the CBI approach implemented by the teachers in different educational settings, included the sheltered content course, the adjunct course, and the theme-based model, etc.

In Sheltered classes, the teacher uses special methods and techniques to shelter subject matter that is to make the content more accessible to second language learner (Howard, 2006); with more practicing activities to improve reading and writing skills in the form of a credit course linked to a sheltered subject matter. The language teaching course may not be necessary to ensure gains in second language competency (Burger, 1989).

In *theme-based* instruction, ‘teachers can select some topics that can satisfy their tastes and language proficiency. Apart from this, student-oriented classes call for students to be actively involved in every phrase, autonomously exploring knowledge (Chi, 2017). Another study (Brinton, 2003) affirms that the themes based lessons provide a lot of useful input using a wide range of activities that promote the successful acquisition of the target language.

The third model of the CBI, *adjunct courses* can enhance students’ self-confidence with a feeling of using the new language to accomplish real tasks as learners are sheltered in the integration of content into language learning. The focus is shifted

from traditional foreign language teaching to the learning of language through the study of subject matter (Styler & Leaver, 1997).

E. Implementation of the CBI Approach

The rapid development in educational settings requires the inclusion of new trends in the teaching-learning process. In Saudi Arabia, the native language Arabic is used in most of the learning environments which acknowledge the grammar-Translation method as a prevailing approach for teaching a general subject. With the emergence of content-based instruction(CBI) in the language teaching process, ‘language proficiency is achieved by shifting the focus of the course from the learning of language per se to the learning of subject matter’(Leaver and Stryker, 1989).

In one of her articles, Duenas (2004) describes Content-Based Instruction as ‘a new paradigm in language education, centered on fostering student competence in a second or foreign language while advancing in the knowledge of a subject matter.’

In the context of second/foreign language learning where content-based instruction is implemented in a classroom other than the language skills classrooms, students are expected to learn both academic subjects, in addition, to achieve a higher level of language proficiency at the same time. Introducing the CBI in this context may enrich the program to provide them various opportunities for using the language.

Integrating subject matter with language learning might motivate the students more than just teaching the textbooks merely to understand the content of the subjects. The teaching techniques and the concerned classroom activities should be designed to focus on teaching the language too. This might be helpful for the learner in accumulating a great deal of vocabulary, improving language discourse, besides expanding the subject knowledge. What makes the Content-Based instruction apart from other kinds of instruction is ‘the expectation that students can learn- and teachers can teach—both academic subject matter content and a new language at the same time’ (Lightbrown, 2014). He also expressed that Language learning through content provides students with a wide variety of opportunities to use language practically in real-life situations. The CBI as a pedagogy can help learners utilize the foreign language to express their thoughts in several situations and to comprehend the subject matter as well at the same time. In content-based instruction, students can acquire ‘the content area of the subject matter with comprehensible input, and simultaneously increase their language skills’ (Krashen, 1982).

F. Literature as Content for the CBI

‘By modeling language, literature teaches sustained; significant communication’ (Sage, 1987) which ensures a learner to convey and receive information practically. Using literature in the EFL classroom has always been very effective as literature

emphasizes the exploration of various themes as compared to other courses; students are able to learn more about how to express their thoughts through language in different situations. In the context of using of literary texts in the EFL classroom, Shang (2006) is found to have well quoted Langer (1997) who adds, "because it taps what they know and who they are, literature is a particularly inviting context for learning both a second/foreign language and literacy" consistent with Langer (1997), literature allows students to reflect on their lives, learning, and language. Literature can open "horizons of possibility, allowing students to question, interpret, connect, and explore" (p. 607). Since long, in Saudi colleges, teaching literature subjects such as novel, poetry, short story, and drama, revolves round the traditional method of analyzing literary texts for mere analytic purpose, not to intensify the training of English language skills, through its content. In many of the colleges in Saudi Arabia, language and literature are not integrated at all, where literature is treated as a separate part of the curriculum. Recently, after various studies conducted on the use of literature in this context, the concept of implementing literary texts in the language learning process is being promoted in secondary education and higher education as well. Though still, the nature of the program does not acknowledge the use of CBI approach in all classrooms, we steal an opportunity to imply the CBI method in classrooms to have a firsthand experience of using content for the development of learners' proficiency in English language skills, and the feedback received by students regarding this initiative is gratifying.

III. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

A. Methods

A qualitative method is adopted for this research study using self-administered questionnaires with both closed and open questions, in addition to some observational study carried out throughout the session of 10 months duration, with two semesters of five months each. Besides, some open-ended behavior-based interview questions are prepared for students at the beginning of implementing the CBI method.

B. Sample

The sample for this study consists of 65 female students from the graduate degree program in one of the Saudi female colleges. The participant students range from the level-5 to level-7 from the degree program, who already been completed their language skill courses. One study course from each level is selected for the application of this method. On the alternate weekly basis, they are switched with an alternate method, i.e., Traditional method of teaching and the CBI method (with using content for language learning purpose). Though the sample of this study is mainly the female students from one college only, the responses of 20 language instructors from male and female colleges were taken

for their perceptions regarding the implementation of Content-based instruction in their classrooms.

C. Data collection

The data obtained from a self-administered questionnaire are analyzed with percentages of the responses collected from the students as well as from the teachers. For the observational study, the researcher has been vigilant during the teaching-learning process, in both tradition method and CBI method of teaching, with close observation and examining each and every minute detail during the lectures, like noticing students' behavior, monitoring their learning activities and then examining the output of their learning. Besides, this research gathered data from various activities in and outside the classrooms, including the use of dictionary, writing essay, to express their opinion, and their active participations in discussions. Below are some samples of activities carried out in the CBI classroom study.

Activity-1

During the study, in each class, the participants were assigned to select 10 words to find its meaning, synonym, and antonyms. Their answers produced the data for the research.

Activity-2

Each student in the level-7 class was asked to write the summary of the chapter within a specified time to examine their language proficiency level and the textual level. Later at the end of the lecture, they were asked to give feedback in reaction to this activity. Both their language competency and their perception of classroom participation were evaluated.

Activity-3

In this activity, the participants are given some topics related to real-life situations to discuss in groups. Later, they are given 2-3 minutes to express their opinion on this topic.

IV. RESULT ANALYSIS

The findings of the study are displayed in tables and figures. The data in table-1 is based on the open-ended behavior based interviews held with students being the participants in this study before implementing the CBI approach on the prescribed courses from three consecutive levels. Table-1 below shows their linguistic competence and their communication skill. The responses are interpreted with an analytic rubric.

Table-1

Participants	Language proficiency			Communicative skill (fluency level)			No. of Respondents
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	
L-5	72%	24%	5%	63.3%	27%	9.7%	27
L-6	25%	65%	10%	44.2%	34.8%	21%	18
L-7	28%	49%	24%	39%	42%	19%	20

The table-2 result reveals the findings that are based on the responses a total of 65 students after implementing the CBI techniques in three courses from different levels. During the study, the students are being tested with a questionnaire consisted

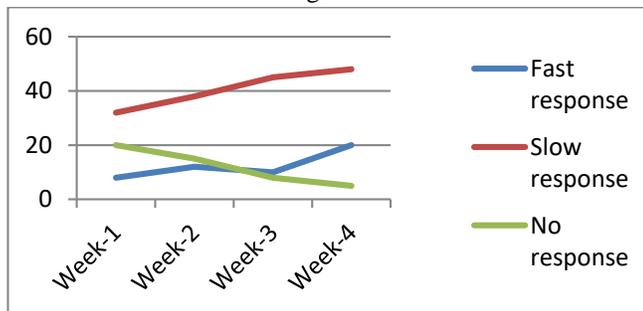
of 10 questions that asked their views regarding the new student-centered CBI approach as compared to the other traditional way of teaching that is student-centered. Their feedbacks provide a satisfactory result as it is shown in table-2. The result is shown in the percentage of the responses who agree on the statements that favor either the CBI method or the Traditional method(TM) of teaching in the development of their self-learning and self-confidence.

Table-2

	Self-learning			Self-Confidence		
	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes	No	Not sure
TM	62.2%	50.3%	8.5%	62.2%	50.3%	8.5%
CBI	62%	33%	5%	62%	33%	5%

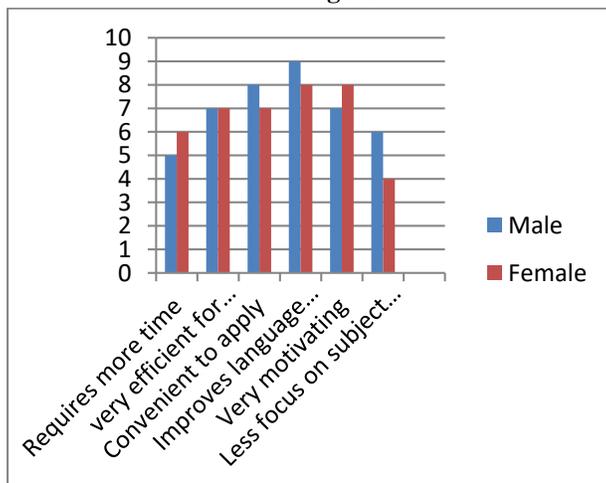
Based on activity-1, the finding reveals that the number of students' participation in classroom activities is increased gradually by taking inspiration from their peers. In the following figure, the responses of the students are displayed in three categories after repeating the test on alternate week.

Figure-1



The chart below represents the faculty's perceptions with regard to the implementation of the CBI approach. The comparative data reveals the mixed responses from both 8 of male and 12 of female language instructors from different colleges.

Figure-2



V. DISCUSSION

The data collected through the qualitative method allows for a clear understanding of the teachers' perception regarding the application of the CBI method and students' attitude towards learning the language with the help of the subject matter. With the restricted time duration of a semester, it is very challenging for the subject teacher to concentrate on language acquisition through the text to teach students to focus on syntactical structure and learning the course content at the same time.

Considering students' comments after explaining a part of the chapter from a novel during the research study, it is noticed that understanding an extract from a short story or a novel creates meaningful results which helps students to be active participants even with low language proficiency level learners. Exercising the CBI approach, enables the students become well versed with the use of tenses after learning from the story that is told in either past tense or present tense. Consequently, through teaching a story, students are able to improve all four language skills to some extent, with a constructive interaction in the classroom. On the contrary, using the old traditional method of teaching, it is marked that the students remain passive listener during the lecture in normal literature classroom as they honestly expressed their views that it's monotonous and uninteresting.

The responses from the open-ended questions reveal the productive outcomes of learning on the part of students in the context of the CBI approach. The positive feedback received from students is presented as follows:

'I feel confident to express myself because I have learned more vocabulary and how to make sentences...'

'earlier I used to be afraid to answer the question asked in the classroom because I thought I was wrong, but now I am more excited to learn and speak in the classroom.'

'The course material has become more interesting with more focus on language rather than on content.'

There is an apparent change in students' attitudes towards English language learning with the use of CBI approach, similar to the finding of Amiri (2014) who conducted investigating research to discover that the Content-Based Instruction (CBI) group outperformed the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) one. On account of this, what is more crucial is to instill the learning interest in the learners, promote motivation to escalate their language proficiency, and above all, change their attitude towards classroom learning.

VI. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of learning after implementing a Content-based instruction approach in a language program through the teaching of other

courses other than the courses specified for learning language skills. Though this procedure of using content for teaching language skills is more efficient in the school level of education, it can be valuable for higher education as well.

This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative study to see how the implementation of CBI could support language development of the students and why this approach is so effective. It is found that students' lack of proficiency in language skill becomes an obstacle in understanding the course content; thence hamper them to overcome their advanced language deficiency. Thereupon, recommending to employ the CBI approach where students 'acquire considerable amounts of the second language, typically doing at least as well as students in regular classes, and they also learn impressive amounts of subject matter (Krashen, 1982) can generate productive results. The data drawn from the questionnaires propose that the utilizing the CBI approach in their course would be fruitful when implied with proper care and with the acute consideration of several circumstances including the educational goals of the institution, the curriculum of the program, the teaching philosophy of the teachers and their willingness to devote their time and energy and finally the support from the administration (Howard, 2006). All these factors are equally accountable for practicing the content-based Instructional approach in their teaching. When administered systematically, the CBI can be a great way to enhance a learner's motivation, self-confidence, their English language proficiency, and cultural literacy (Stryker & Leaver, 1997).

VII. LIMITATIONS

While this study is carried out in just one department and the data is restricted to three classrooms from a degree program only, it is more likely that the finding might have been different or give more positive result when implementing the CBI approach in all other courses in different institutions and tested the learning achievements in language acquisition context. In one of his studies, Cammarata (2010) ascertained that CBI is 'so rarely implemented within conventional instructional contexts there are limited opportunities for teachers to observe its use in the classroom.' This is in the context of the constraints imposed by the nature of the program that affects both students' learning and teacher's experiences. On this ground, it is recommended to expand the study in various fields as much as feasible.

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