

CONCERNS WITH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI) IN ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

With the considerable amount of interest in content-based instruction (CBI) over the past decade, inevitably, CBI has found its way into Asian EFL contexts. This is largely due in part to its 'success' in ESL environments and its global attraction as a mode of language education for the world. Yet, in Asia, a number of significant concerns with CBI have repeatedly failed to attract much attention. These primarily relate to EFL students, EFL teachers, concept learning, and the research 'supporting' content-based instruction as it pertains to the negative implications of downplaying the importance of conventional language teaching. Consequently, this paper looks to examine these issues in the hopes of raising awareness of the disadvantages of using CBI in Asian EFL environments, and how it can inevitably prove problematic in such contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Content-based instruction (CBI) is a mode of teaching that prioritises the learning of content over language. It is a method of instruction popularized in the ESL field by the notion that a second language can be adequately learned when it is the medium of instruction and not the object (Campbell, Gray, Rhodes & Snow, 1985; Lambert & Tucker, 1972). Moreover, the teaching of content is believed to provide the necessary comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) for effective language learning to take place (Short, 1991) and that because of this, general language learning outcomes are perceived to be better through content-based instruction than through language teaching alone (Stict, 1997).

It is insights like these that have inevitably encouraged the practice of CBI, and led to its application in Asian EFL contexts. As a growing worldwide phenomenon, content-based instruction has gradually transformed into a paradigm for global education (Dyer & Bushell, 1996). This trend has continued to manifest and with it, the expectation that language instruction should include more than just the basics of language content, use and form (Hullah, 2003).

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CONCERNS WITH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI) IN ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS

Yet, with this interest over the past decade, a number of significant concerns with CBI in Asian EFL contexts have repeatedly failed to attract much attention. These primarily relate to EFL students, EFL teachers, concept learning, and the research ‘supporting’ content-based instruction as it pertains to the negative implications of downplaying the importance of conventional language teaching. Consequently, this paper looks to examine these issues in the hopes of raising awareness of the disadvantages of using CBI in Asian EFL environments, and how it can inevitably prove problematic in such contexts.

CONCERNS FOR EFL STUDENTS IN ASIA

Unlike in ESL environments where the majority of second language learners can typically expect to encounter content in English inside and outside of the classroom and have regular opportunities to negotiate its meaning, most students who learn content in English through CBI in Asian EFL contexts do not. In fact, many appear to lack the appropriate background knowledge of the English language and its culture to effectively deal with content. Moreover, many often have little to no experience or familiarity with the content of topics they are presented with (Short, 1991), and so, are ill-prepared to face the overwhelming cognitive challenge of learning content in a second language (Brown, 2004; McKeon, 1994).

With this being the case, it simply seems ethically wrong of EFL teachers to expect high achievement in content areas from such students. It should only make sense that content learning ought to be considered incidental at best and that Asian EFL students should not be held accountable for content outcomes over those related to language learning. In principle, this appears logical considering there is no research to support the assumption that CBI better prepares and motivates learners for using language in the real world than any of the other well-known language teaching methodologies (Zaparucha, 2006). Certainly, so far, Asia-based research into CBI only appears to back this claim. Miyazato (2001) found through her Japan-based study that there was no correlation between student English language proficiencies and motivation in both a team-taught content-based course and a team-taught non-content-based one (i.e. a conventional language course). To add, a recent 2007 CBI study based on a three-year survey in Japan revealed that it is not always ‘clear as to what aspects students’ overall English proficiency content-based instruction actually helps to develop if at all’ (Takagi & Tanabe, 2007, p.16).

Nevertheless, it appears that the majority of Asian EFL students in CBI driven classrooms are often expected to master content matter in a language that is still in the process of being learned (Cummins, 1981), while lacking the necessary prior schemata and language skills to access specific content areas

(Twyman, Ketterlin-Geller, McCoy, & Tindall, 2003). Furthermore, the content materials that formulate the core of CBI lessons are often adapted from authentic sources, and tend to be at a level of conceptual and linguistic difficulty that pose a serious challenge to students' language abilities. As a result, learners must constantly struggle to gain sufficient control over the language (Bialystok, 1994) to even have the slightest chance of attending to such content and form.

These concerns explicitly expressed here reveal the degree of seriousness CBI poses for Asian EFL learners. Such individuals can become confused and de-motivated as a result of the lack of visible progress in their language skills through content-based instruction. Moreover, levels of anxiety appear to be much higher in students who take CBI courses, and can contribute to a more adverse classroom atmosphere (Habte-Gabr, 2004), as well as lead to difficulties in student attitudes towards learning. Academic behavioural problems like copying directly from sources (i.e. plagiarism) can, thus, manifest due to the failure to access content, which may be attributed to having not learned the language necessary to succeed. Finally, as content-based instruction is not directly language focused, and the majority of Asian EFL contexts are largely monolingual, numerous opportunities for students to slip back into their first language are inevitably created, which can thereby prolong and negate the English language learning process.

Still, all in all, as highly problematic as the use of CBI appears to be for Asian EFL learners, content-based instruction has continued to be used as an excuse to teach language in a more contextualized, pseudo-realistic manner (Snow, Cortes, & Pron, 1998) at the expense of overlooking real student difficulties with language and content.

CONCERNS FOR EFL TEACHERS IN ASIA

With the responsibility to teach both content and language, EFL teachers in the Asia-based CBI classroom are often faced with a number of teaching and material-related concerns. These specifically relate to the difficulty they encounter in dealing with content as well as in finding and preparing it. To trained EFL specialists, content can appear as something that many may have forgotten, or perhaps may not have even learned (Mett, 1991). In fact, some may be quite uncomfortable teaching the content of fields they may have failed to identify with themselves, while others may be overly reluctant to participate without additional in-service training in content areas. These issues, along with the likelihood of having to externally consult with colleagues in other disciplines to determine which, when and how content will be integrated with language can prove trying, time-consuming, and schedule wise, logistically impossible (Papai, 2000). Moreover, if such content

CONCERNS WITH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI) IN ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS

specialists are not readily available to provide insight and guidance, EFL teachers are left to their own devices to fill in the gaps in their content knowledge. This can lead to further difficulties such as in finding appropriate authentic sources to teach.

It is this difficulty in particular that readily explains why CBI is often criticized for being so teacher-centred. Because teachers need to spend vast amounts of time finding teaching materials for their students to access, many neglect to teach them the skills of learning on their own, which they need to approach such material autonomously (Kinsella, 1997). Even more, in not providing them with insights into learner independence, teachers fail to prepare them for learning beyond the classroom. Likewise, teachers are liable to forget to enhance English language development through content areas as a consequence for reconciling the language needs of their students. As a result, they overlook language-learning areas that require more focused attention (Short, 1997). A very good example of this comes from a Malaysia-based study by Shah (2003). Shah found that many grammatical errors are often left unattended to and remain uncorrected as teachers respond to the content of their learners' speech rather than to their errors in grammar. This finding is highly significant as it supports the earlier research of Allen, Swain, Harley and Cummins (1990), who found from their CBI-based study that only 19 per cent of the total errors they recorded were, in fact, corrected.

Along the same lines, there is also the issue of varying levels of classes. Having to find authentic sources of content to meet such diverse language needs can prove exceedingly difficult. This is especially true for lower level classes where content may simply prove inaccessible and incomprehensible due to the lack of English language skills. Yet, it is not uncommon to find students of differing ability levels relegated to the same class (Freeman & Freeman, 1998), since teachers are often expected to use authentic materials in the CBI classroom that 'have not been simplified for pedagogical purposes' (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003, p.34) despite the presence of such anomalies.

Still, as important as all of this may be, there also appears to be an underlying thematic problem with CBI in Asian EFL contexts; most EFL teachers, like many ESL teachers, are simply not trained in and knowledgeable of how to integrate language and content in their classrooms (Crandall, 1992; Freeman & Freeman, 1998). Moreover, it is this alarming lack of CBI expertise among ESL and EFL teachers in both the content areas and in the discipline-specific didactics within which language teaching is placed (Kaufman, 2004) that has added significant weight to the counter CBI argument. Without proper training and knowledge resolutely designed for EFL teachers in Asia, the students they aim to teach ineluctably suffer. This is hardly surprising however, considering trained EFL professionals are

educated to teach the English language, and not content. Yet, there appears to be a large number of teachers in Asia today who openly endorse content-based instruction as an 'effective' mode of teaching, and continue to endeavour to willingly and/or unknowingly defeat or alter the purpose of their learned expertise. It is perhaps for this reason that one should remain suspect of successful student gains in language acquisition in such learning environments, especially when the majority of these teachers remain untrained, unfamiliar and unprepared to handle the full scale of CBI implementation.

CONCERNS WITH CONCEPT LEARNING

With the focus on teaching content over language in CBI, one can forget that the underlying purpose of content is to help contextualize language. Content is something used to invite students into the learning process by helping them situate language. Moreover, it serves as a vehicle for information; the means for teaching and acquiring subject knowledge (Crandall, 1992). However, the notion that content readily mediates students' understanding of concepts is an issue of contention, especially in Asian EFL contexts. To reiterate, most Asian EFL students come to class lacking the necessary background knowledge of the English language and its culture to effectively tackle content. Additionally, many often appear to have little to no experience with the content of the topics they are presented with and therefore, lack the cognitive preparation necessary to accordingly deal with it in English. This suggests that the teaching of content is unlikely to facilitate student understanding of concepts. Yet, at the same time, it does say something about the role language learning plays in concept learning in Asian EFL environments.

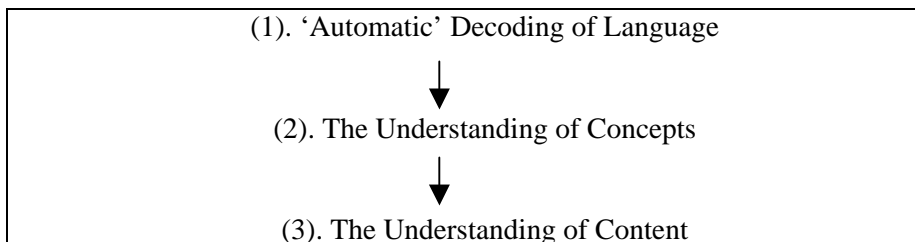
In order for coherent student understanding of concepts to take place, the decoding aspect of the second language (in this case English) must transpire. Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004) support this claim through their emphasis on the importance of language learning in the comprehension of concepts, and the inevitable problems of teaching them in isolation of language skills. However, this aspect or process needs to be 'automatic', and performed 'without conscious attention' (Stict, 1997, p.3). This suggests that it is essential for EFL teachers to first gauge if their students are in fact consistently 'noticing' the language they are learning before moving on to access their understanding of concepts. If students have yet to completely 'automatize' the decoding process, then it can be incredibly difficult to judge whether they understand the concepts they are being taught. This is highly significant, as the understanding of concepts is pivotal to whether one can understand content and extend knowledge to new problem areas or not

CONCERNS WITH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI) IN ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS

(Martin & Mitchell, 2004). Research has shown that without students' understanding of the concepts they have been taught, their ability to solve new problems (e.g. understand content) is impeded (Hestenes, Wells, & Swackhamer, 1992). However, when teaching and learning is sequenced towards students' conceptual understanding 'long-run acquisition of stable and usable bodies of knowledge' (Ausubel, 2000, p.31) are generated.

Therefore, in the absence of student comprehension of concepts, CBI appears problematic. As Asian EFL learners seek conceptual explanations for the content they are presented with, CBI offers little to account for this. Thus, the teaching of content without first directly assessing student understandings of the concepts behind it is tantamount to a Canadian teacher teaching students about the Canadian health care system without fully knowing whether or not they understand the concept of socialized medicine. It is for this reason that the processes aforementioned here appear as the suggested means for Asian EFL students to successfully access content (Summarily represented in Figure 1).

Figure 1:



CONCERNS WITH CBI 'SUPPORTED' RESEARCH

There is indeed a vast abundance of research available today that lends 'support' for content-based instruction. Much of this can be found in journals, books, on the Internet and in other miscellaneous publications. Yet, it is often not recognized that most of the evidence in favour of CBI stems from research in educational and cognitive psychology, which are both somewhat 'removed from language learning contexts' (Stoller, 1997, p.1). Moreover, the majority of CBI research as it relates to language teaching in particular has been primarily ESL based in the K-12 environments, FL K-12 (immersion and bilingual programmes), post-secondary FL and ESL contexts, and FLAC programmes (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). Still, on the whole, it appears that many teachers in Asian EFL contexts are quick to confirm and conform to the 'effectiveness' of CBI simply based on its global appeal.

A very good example of this comes from Thooptong (2005), whom, in her Thailand-based study, initially states that because of the overall low English skills of 80 Thai students she pre-assessed (59% demonstrated weak performance in listening, 44% of students demonstrated weak performance in speaking, 19% of students demonstrated weak performance in reading, and 67% demonstrated weak performance in writing) that ‘content-based instruction *deserves* to be employed in the EFL classroom’ (Thooptong, 2005, p.2). However, this notion of CBI ‘deserving’ a place in the classroom is never quantitatively justified in Thooptong’s study. Instead, she provides results that are interpretations of qualitative findings supported by background research based on content-based instruction in ESL contexts. These, alone, serve as her only reasons for advocating it, even though no significant improvement in overall student English skills was recorded other than in listening, which, in and of itself, cannot be directly attributed to CBI. To Thooptong’s credit, she at least endeavoured to look into CBI’s effectiveness in an Asian EFL context. Still, there are countless unfounded references to content-based instruction like this found throughout the ESL/EFL commercial textbook market, or in the proceedings of second language teaching conferences (Brinton & Holten, 1997) that attest to the confidence that many have in it. All the same, as popular as the use of CBI may apparently be, it is by no means a justification of its validity. In fact, there is some significant research that suggests Asia-based EFL teachers should be quite critical and sceptical of it.

Unbeknownst to many and vastly unacknowledged, most of the ‘proof’ supporting CBI in English language teaching today ‘does not use empirical data collection, but rather relies on student evaluations and other qualitative data’ (Bretag, 2004, p. 532). It is also commonly unrecognized that no known research has ever been undertaken to compare ‘content-based instruction programmes to process-oriented ones that are already in place’ (Stict, 1997, p.2) in either ESL or EFL contexts. Moreover, there still remains little to no research or curriculum development in the ESL/EFL disciplines that guides teachers in accommodating linguistic and cultural diversity in their CBI instruction (Kaufman & Crandall, 2005), especially in multi-lingual and multi-cultural Asian EFL contexts (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, etc.). This has only been compounded further by the fact that teachers and curriculum planners have continued to spend far too much time delving into issues related to the design and implementation of CBI than on methods for the assessment of content and language learning in CBI environments (Grabe & Stroller, 1997).

Learner wise, independent research on CBI in Asia, like the study done by Catlin (2002), suggests that many Asian EFL students who take CBI classes are not satisfied with the progress of their English language skills. Catlin

CONCERNS WITH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI) IN ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS

found that the majority of EFL students from her study who took a CBI course later indicated they felt it was important for them to take conventional English language courses *in addition* to content-based ones. This proved to be an important find as Amelsvoort (2004) later discovered from his study that the core content in his EFL classroom was also insufficient in overcoming language proficiency problems, further supporting the notion that Asian EFL students regularly need teachers to focus more on language.

One intriguing yearlong ethnographic inquiry on CBI particularly showed that language work in content-based classrooms is frequently given little status when set against other knowledge priorities and demands supported by greater societal and education agendas (Creese, 2005). Albeit ESL related, it is mentioned here for the serious implications it has for Asian EFL contexts in regards to the preclusion of inter-faculty collaboration. More often than not, it is simply implausible in Asian EFL environments for teachers of content and/or language expertise to collaborate with one another regularly if at all. Unlike in ESL environments, where native speaking content specialists can be sought out, consulted with or even assist in teaching, in Asian EFL contexts content specialists do exist, but they either do not speak English or they are non-native speakers of English that are often not proficient enough to teach a content-based course in that language. Inevitably then, many of these content experts resort to asking native English speaking EFL teachers to teach and design such courses without much thought for both the teachers' and the students' content knowledge and especially, the students' language abilities. This is true of my own institution, where native English speaking EFL teachers in my department were asked by non-native English speaking-content experts from another department to develop and implement a second year course curriculum for a specific major in English; a request made without any acknowledgement of the lack or absence of existing CBI expertise, deficits in EFL teachers' and students' content knowledge, varying levels of student language ability, the lack or absence of authentic materials and without their (i.e. the content experts) direct involvement (i.e. collaborating and assisting in classroom teaching).

However, having said this, one of the greatest misfortunes has still been the minute amount of credible ESL/ EFL research available that has consistently emphasised the importance of language proficiency in enhancing performance in content-based cognitive skills and the need to examine the link between English language proficiency and performance in content-based programmes. For the most part, this has all largely remained unrecognized and consequently, indirectly attests to the global impact and appeal CBI has had on language teaching today. Yet, small as this research may be, it is highly significant in Asian EFL contexts, especially when so many EFL teachers are often compelled to 'sacrifice academic content to meet the

language needs of their students' (Freeman & Freeman, 1998, pp.39–40). Still, the relevancy of such work has continuously failed to detract much if any attention from the volume of that, which 'supports' CBI.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper has attempted to reveal some of the salient concerns with CBI in Asian EFL contexts today. Without addressing these, there is reason to believe that the 'malpractice' of CBI will continue to thrive through EFL teachers who fail to acknowledge the disadvantages that currently exist through its implementation. English language teachers in Asia need to understand that the environments they work in are contextually and culturally unique and that because of this, learners differ greatly in their content knowledge from students in the ESL domain. Accordingly then, there is a need to recognize that Asian EFL learners often appear to lack the necessary knowledge of the English language and its culture to effectively deal with the content they encounter. What is more, they are often not cognitively prepared for the linguistic and conceptual challenge of tackling the unfamiliar content of the topics presented to them, especially through authentic English language materials. CBI, therefore, puts such students at risk of becoming confused, anxious, de-motivated, and unambitious about learning English as a foreign language.

Likewise, content can prove to be a serious problem for EFL teachers in Asia. Many may be unfamiliar or inexperienced with the content they are supposed to teach and lack the know-how to implement it. As a result, they must put in a considerable amount of time and effort to prepare for classes. Yet, with little to no opportunities for inter-departmental or external collaboration with teachers in the relevant content related fields or the fact that such individuals are very often not available to provide guidance, EFL teachers are inevitably left to fend for themselves. This, in many ways, is indicative of the serious lack or absence of CBI training for EFL teachers in Asia today. Moreover, with the increased burden and demand content teaching puts on them, EFL teachers can come to neglect or overlook the language needs and areas their students require more development in. Furthermore, they can come to inaccurately assess student comprehension of the concepts behind the content they teach as a consequence of their explicit focus on content and the assumed mediation of concepts through it.

Overall then, it appears that there ought to be some admission from within the Asian EFL community that contrary to its global impact and appeal, CBI does pose some serious concerns. As of today, research into CBI in Asian EFL contexts either appears to contradict its 'positive implications' or is essentially inconclusive. Even more, in spite of CBI's 'success' in ESL

CONCERNS WITH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI) IN ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS

contexts, the research behind it has continued to be heavily qualitative in form, and, thus, remains suspect and questionable until proven otherwise.

Consequently, it is for precisely this reason that studies of a quantitative nature must be undertaken to readily challenge the notion of CBI's 'effectiveness and merit globally'. In so doing, the field of English language teaching can gain much needed empirical insight into the understanding of such instruction as it is applied in different contexts. What is more, it can be determined whether there are legitimate, justifiable and valid reasons for making global generalizations for it within Asia and the field of TEFL.

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CONCERNS WITH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION (CBI) IN ASIAN EFL CONTEXTS

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