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Content-based Instruction

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Introduction

Howatt (1984) notes that there are two versions of the Communicative Approach: a strong version and a weak version. The weak version, which we illustrated in the previous chapter, recognizes the importance of providing learners with opportunities to practice English for communicative purposes. For instance, we saw in the CLT lesson we observed that students were provided with a great deal of practice in learning the forms for a particular function, i.e. predicting. The strong version of the Communicative Approach goes beyond giving students opportunities to practice communication. The strong version asserts that language is acquired through communication. The weak version could be described as ‘learning to use’ English; the strong version entails ‘using English to learn it’ (Howatt 1984: 279). Contentbased instruction, which we explore in this chapter, and task-based and participatory approaches, which we will look at in the next two chapters, belong in the strongversion category. While the three may seem different at first glance, what they have in common is that they give priority to communicating, over predetermined linguistic content, teaching through communication rather than for it. Before we examine the three approaches in detail, two points need to be made. First, some language educators might object to the inclusion of content-based, taskbased, and participatory approaches in a methods book, for they might be more comfortable calling these ‘syllabus types’. Nevertheless, others feel that a ‘method’ designation is very appropriate. Snow (1991), for instance, characterizes contentbased instruction as a ‘method with many faces’—both to make the case for contentbased instruction as a method of language teaching and to portray the great variety of forms and settings in which it takes place. In addition, Kumaravadivelu (1993) observes that the term ‘task’ is often used with reference to both content and methodology of language teaching. Indeed, within the strong version of

Principles 1 The class is studying geography through the target language. Both the content and the language are targets for learning. 2 The teacher asks the students what they know about a globe. Teaching should build on students' previous experience. 3 The teacher supplies the missing language when the students have trouble in explaining a concept in the target language. The teacher scaffolds the linguistic content, i.e. helps learners say what it is they want to say by building a complete utterance together with the students. 4 The students call out their answers enthusiastically as the teacher writes them on the blackboard. When learners perceive the relevance of their language use, they are motivated to learn. They know that it is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. 5 The teacher reads the new vocabulary and then the students watch a video entitled 'Understanding Globes.' Language is learned most effectively when it is used as a medium to convey content of interest to the students. 6 The students fill in the vocabulary words in the blanks in the modified cloze passage as they watch the video. Vocabulary is easier to acquire when there are contextual clues to help convey meaning. It is important to integrate all the skills, as well as vocabulary and grammar in an authentic context. 7 The teacher provides a number of examples using the present passive with latitude and longitude coordinates. When they work with authentic subject matter, students need language support. For instance, the teacher may provide a number of examples, build in some redundancy, use comprehension checks, etc. 8 The students are given the latitude and longitude coordinates, and they have to come to the front of the classroom to find the city on the globe. Learners work with meaningful, cognitively demanding language and content within the context of authentic material and tasks. 9 The teacher uses a dictogloss. She discusses its organization. It is important for students to learn the discourse organization of academic texts. 10 For homework, the students are given a graphic organizer, which they are to label.

Reviewing the Principles Let us now see what principles underlie content-based instruction by answering our usual 10 questions and considering a number of additional principles.

1 What are the goals of teachers who use CBI? In a CBI class, teachers want the students to master both language and content. The content can be themes of general interest to students, such as current events or their hobbies, or it can be an academic subject, which provides natural content for the study of language. Teachers do not want to delay students' academic study or language study, so teachers encourage the development of both simultaneously.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students? The teacher needs to set clear learning objectives for both content and language. The teacher then creates activities to teach both, scaffolding the language needed for study of the content. The students' role is to engage actively with both content and language, using each to learn the other.

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process? Teachers must help learners understand authentic texts. Teachers make meaning clear through the use of visuals, realia, repeating, and by giving a lot of examples, building on students' previous experiences. Teachers also design activities that address both language and content, and the discourse organization of the content, with specific language activities highlighting how language is used in a particular subject—the language of mathematics (Ball and Goffney 2006) differs from the language for history (Schleppegrell, Achugar, and Oteiza 2004), for example. Students are actively involved in learning language and content, often through interaction with other students. Thinking skills are also taught in order to help students undertake academic tasks. Graphic organizers are one tool used to assist this process.

4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction? The teacher guides student learning. She supports them by having students pay attention to how language is used to deliver content and by scaffolding their language development. Students often work collaboratively to understand content

while actively using the language they are studying. 5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with? It is assumed that learning content and language together keeps students interested and motivated. They understand the relevance of what they are studying and that language is a means to an end. 6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed? Language is meaningful and a medium through which content is conveyed. Culture is addressed in teaching to the extent that it is present in the content area being studied. 7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized? The content determines what language is worked on. The language includes not only vocabulary items and grammar structures, but also how these contribute to the discourse organization of texts. All four skills are integrated in authentic contexts. 8 What is the role of the students' native language? There is no overt role for the students' native language. 9 How is evaluation accomplished? Students are evaluated on their knowledge of content and their language ability. 10 How does the teacher respond to student errors? The teacher corrects student errors by giving students the correct form or allowing students to self-correct. She notes the errors, and recycles content to ensure that students are learning to use language they will need in a school context.

Reviewing the Techniques • Dictogloss In a dictogloss (Wajnryb 1990), students listen twice to a short talk or a reading on appropriate content. The first time through, students listen for the main idea, and then the second time they listen for details. Next, students write down what they have remembered from the talk or reading. Some teachers have their students take notes while listening. The students then use their notes to reformulate what has been read. Students get practice in note-taking in this way. Next, they work with a partner or in a small group to construct together the best version of what they have heard. What they write is shared with the whole class for a peer-editing session. Through these processes, students become familiar with the organization of a variety of texts within a content area. • Graphic Organizers Graphic

organizers are visual displays that help students to organize and remember new information. They involve drawing or writing down ideas and making connections. They combine words and phrases, symbols, and arrows to map knowledge. They include diagrams, tables, columns, and webs. Through the use of graphic organizers, students can understand text organization, which helps them learn to read academic texts and to complete academic tasks, such as writing a summary of what they have read. A key rationale for the use of graphic organizers in CBI is that they facilitate recall of cognitively demanding content, enabling students to process the content material at a deeper level and then be able to use it for language practice.

- **Language Experience Approach** Students take turns dictating a story about their life experiences to the teacher who writes it down in the target language. Each student then practices reading his or her story with the teacher's assistance. The Language Experience Approach applies the principles of WL: The text is about content that is significant to the students, it is collaboratively produced, it is whole, and since it is the student's story, the link between text and meaning is facilitated.
- **Process Writing** Traditionally, when teachers teach writing, they assign topics for students to write on; perhaps they do a bit of brainstorming about the topic during a pre-writing phase, and then have students write about the topic without interruption. Subsequently, teachers collect and evaluate what students have written. Such instruction is very 'product-oriented;' there is no involvement of the teacher in the act or 'process' of writing. In process writing, on the other hand, students may initially brainstorm ideas about a topic and begin writing, but then they have repeated conferences with the teacher and the other students, during which they receive feedback on their writing up to that point, make revisions, based on the feedback they receive, and carry on writing. In this way, students learn to view their writing as someone else's reading and to improve both the expression of meaning and the form of their writing as they draft and redraft. Process writing shifts the emphasis in teaching writing