A Proposal for a New Curriculum for EFL Education of China: Integrated Content-Based Instruction*

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Much debate has surrounded the question of whether middle-school students can learn academic content if they do not yet have a high level of proficiency in the English language, but content-based instruction has already been used to promote both the linguistic and academic development of CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) students in the grade K-12 in Western countries. This proposal discusses the issues and dilemmas about the curriculum implementation in the EFL (English as a foreign language) education in China’s middle-schools and examines the nature of integrated content-based (ICB) instruction by providing its rationale, definition, evolution, and delivery, and based on the above, it explores an excellent venue that the ICB could provide for Chinese student’s EFL learning and calls for the application of the curriculum of ICB into the EFL instruction in China’s secondary education.

Keywords: CBI, curriculum, EFL in China

Introduction

It has been debated for several decades about the ineffectiveness of the English teaching in China’s middle-schools. Many students are complaining about the rigid English teaching approach and the minimal effects on their English communicative ability. Even an expression has been created to describe this kind of English instruction—“dumb English”, which indicates that English learners could not speak English even though they have learned it for many years and have exerted great efforts on it. Although many proposals have been put forward about the improvement on the middle-school English teaching, their enhancement on the student’s English achievement is still not very obvious.

The same rigid traditional teaching approach and curriculum have also been implemented in the local middle schools for decades. Many teachers still stick to the direct method or audio-lingual way and refuse to transform their old way of instruction. They hold the opinion that they were brought up in this way; therefore, it should be the most effective way to learn English. Due to the fact that educators are striving to bring balance to the educational field in which decisions have often been made based on ideology other than evidence, the author makes a proposal for a new research-based curriculum in middle school EFL (English as a foreign language) instruction, that is, Integrated Content-Based Instruction, for the purpose of improving the current EFL teaching in China’s secondary education.

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Curriculum Proposal

Rationales of CBI

In the “communicative” language teaching (CLT) field, two major versions have been identified and discussed by the late H. H. Stern (1981). One—mainly European approach, which he dubbed the “L-” (for linguistics), derived from new kinds of linguistic analysis which is based on such semantic elements as notions and functions and particular speech acts. The other approach, which he dubbed the “P-” (for psychology and pedagogy), derived not from any kind of linguistic analysis but from studies of learners and the language-learning process. This approach mainly focuses on the conditions under which second language learners can learn best and the activities which language teachers can adopt in their second language teaching classrooms to facilitate student learning. Eskey (1992) proposed that content-based instruction (CBI) is clearly a descendent of the P-approach in the sense that it consciously rejects the common sense notion that the content of a language course should be language. On the other hand, a basic promise of CBI is that people do not learn languages, then use them, but that people learn languages by using them.

Research related to ESL (English as a second language) students further indicates that language learning and content-matter learning are closely related with each other. Therefore, language and content knowledge must be taught simultaneously if ESL students are to achieve both academic success and linguistic proficiency on their second language (Cummins, 2000; Cummins, 1998). When ESL students learn English through content-based instruction, they attain a higher level of second language proficiency faster than they study English as the focus of instruction (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982).

For second language learners, language proficiency includes both the basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in order to be successful in linguistic field and academic field (Mohan, 1986). Regarding the CALP development of ESL students, Collier (1995) commented:

Students do less well in programs that focus on discrete units of language taught in a structured, sequenced curriculum with the learner treated as a passive recipient of knowledge; students achieve significantly better in programs that teach language through cognitively complex academic content in math, science, social studies, and literature, taught through problem solving, discovery learning in highly interactive classroom activities. (p. 2)

What Is Integrated Content-Based Method?

The ICB method is a means of providing content-based second language instruction using academic thematic units (Herrera & Murry, 2004). The theme of the unit provides a context for academic and language development (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989). All of the sources that can provide ideas for the unit’s focus include the classroom, the environment, and the target culture. Activities that integrate the teaching of content and language concepts are then incorporated into instruction, which is structured around the unit’s topic, idea, or theme (Herrera & Murry, 2004).

Evolution of ICB

According to Herrera and Murry (2004), for decades, foreign language departments, adult education programs, and military programs have been teaching content classes for specific purposes. These programs, often referred to as English for specific purposes (ESP) or language for specific purposes (LSP), seek to prepare
students to learn language for different environments (Briton et al., 1989). ESP and LSP instruction use specially designed content-based texts and lectures to assist adult CLD students in developing speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in English (Herrera & Murry, 2004). What are the differences between ESP/LEP and CBI? According to Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991), one of the differences is that CBI is generally limited to the English as a second language (ESL) setting, in places like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, while ESP has a broader meaning and has become an international movement in that much of the interesting ESP work takes place in countries in which English is a foreign language. The other difference is that CBI has perhaps become most closely linked to sheltered English and the education of children in the K-12 setting while ESP, though traditionally focused upon the advanced adult academic students, still claims to encompass all teaching of specific groups of adults with identifiable needs (Johns, 1991).

How to Deliver ICB Instruction?

The ICB method places an emphasis on three key factors that are each applicable to both language and content teachers: (1) the use of a variety of media, (2) the development of students’ thinking skills, and (3) the use of student-centered instruction. The following section is used to provide an outline of the components of the ICB method (Herrera & Murry, 2004).

Planning an ICB lesson

Selecting a theme. According to Herrera and Murry (2004), a theme in ICB instruction provides the framework for the teachers of instruction according to the identified needs of ESL students. It is an overarching idea that shapes the unit, lessons, and topics that constitute the ICB methods. Pesola (1995) suggested the following tips for teacher to consider before they choose the topic.

1. What do learner characteristics, such as developmental level, learning style, experiential background, and culture, describe the students as individuals?
2. Does the classroom environment support the proposed theme?
3. What understandings about the culture and the subject content will the students develop?
4. Are materials available to support a given range of activities related to the theme and associated topics?

Creating language and content objectives. When selecting language and content objectives, attention should be given to their specific connections to the topic. Additionally, a comprehensive examination of student’s linguistic, academic, cognitive, and sociocultural needs provides guidance in developing appropriate objectives. (Herrera & Murry, 2004).

Gathering appropriate instructional materials. Regarding to choosing the appropriate teaching materials for CLD students, Brinton and colleagues (1989) proposed the following considerations for teachers:

- Students interest level
- Difficulty level of the text
- Accessibility of the text in terms of students’ comprehension
- Availability of the text
- Flexibility of the text (i.e., Does it allow for the integration of multiple skills and activities?)

When appropriate text selection guidelines are taken into consideration, the opportunities for student learning are enhanced. The teacher is able to provide content material that is not only comprehensible for students
but also sufficiently challenging to interest and motivate them to participate in the learning process (Herrera & Murry, 2004).

**Arranging the classroom environment.** Within the instructional design of an ICB lesson, effective teachers seek to create a learning environment in which respect and rapport are paramount. Such an environment is characterized by the following traits (Herrera & Murry, 2004):

- The learning culture reflects the importance of the content as well as the learning needs of CLD students.
- The classroom is a safe environment in which the opinions and insights of every student are valued and respected.
- Teacher-student interaction reflects the willingness of each to learn from the other.

**Instruction**

**Pre-teaching key content vocabulary.** In an ICB lesson, the use of content language that targets both academic and linguistic developments is critical. In fact, the consistent and comprehensive use of the target language facilitates and increases EFL students’ understanding of the lesson. To enhance students’ comprehension of the content material, effective teachers select principal vocabulary terms from the lesson and pre-teach them to EFL students. This pre-teaching of key vocabulary helps EFL students prepare for the lesson as well as make critical connections to their preexisting background knowledge (Herrera & Murry, 2004).

**Building background.** When presenting an ICB lesson, effective teachers guide EFL students to make connections between the content-area curriculum and their past experiences and knowledge. Making such connections to prior knowledge and experiences can be beneficial to EFL students of both academic and social affective reasons. Strategies to incorporate and build on EFL students’ background knowledge include but are not limited to (Herrera & Murry, 2004):

- Posing questions to the students about their past experiences.
- Asking students what they know about the key concepts.
- Having students free write about the topic so that the teacher can assess their knowledge and understanding of the lesson material before teaching.
- Providing visual cues and the students’ background knowledge.
- Inviting family or community members to share information about the topic with the class.

**Facilitate collaborative learning.** Vygotsky (1978) proposed that children learn as a result of social interaction. Cooperative learning allows EFL students to interact with one another using language that pushes them beyond basic interpersonal communication to develop their cognitive academic language proficiency; in addition, it encourages the active engagement of EFL students in content instruction (Herrera & Murry, 2004).

The primary considerations for educators when creating cooperative learning groups include the following (Herrera & Murry, 2004):

- Make sure group work is developmentally appropriate.
- Provide multiple opportunities for students to discuss the material orally.
- Use a variety of grouping organizations (one-to-one, small group, whole group, etc.).
- Foster interdependence among students by structuring groups so that no one individual can complete the task alone.
• Motivate groups to work together by making sure that each member of the group is held accountable for his or her tasks.
• Create a group setting in which communication in any language is accepted and respected. Use more capable peers to scaffold language transitions.
• Work with groups to ensure that students are being supportive of one another.
• Provide rich feedback that acknowledges the efforts of the entire group.

**Using authentic activities for integrating literacy.** Activities in an ICB lesson allow the teacher to create authentic experiences that involve speaking, listening, reading, and writing throughout the lesson (Herrera & Murry, 2004). Curtain and Haas (1995) put forward the following recommendations for teachers to consider when creating the activities to engage the ESL/EFL students.

• Use the students’ prior knowledge and personal experience.
• Use holistic strategies that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing that naturally connect language and content.
• Challenge the students to think critically.
• Address the students’ multiple ways of learning.

**Engaging EFL students cognitively.** In addition to creating activities that are content specific and academically challenging, Herrera and Murry (2004) recommended effective teachers find ways to cognitively engage their students during ESL lessons. One of the primary ways to create more cognitively engaging and intrinsically motivating lessons is to relate academic content and language tasks in ways that guide students to use higher-order thinking skills (Herrera & Murry, 2004). Specific considerations for providing cognitively engaging and intrinsically motivating lessons for the ESL students according to the ICB methods include fostering opportunities for ESL students to engage in extended discourse (Herrera & Murry, 2004):

• Increase the percentage of questions asked of students that require the use of inferential and higher-order thinking skills.
• Develop activities that engage students in cognitively challenging academic tasks, such as doing research projects, problem solving that pertains to student-relevant issues, and writing essays, plays, and poetry.
• Engage students in activities that require them to use metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective learning strategies.

**Providing visual support and graphic organizers.** Herrera and Murry (2004) held the belief that visual aids and graphic organizers play a vital role in an ICB lesson because they provide the contextual cues from which students can make meaningful connections to the content; therefore, when teaching an ICB lesson, teachers plan for an increased use of visual support and realia throughout the lesson. Visual support can include items, such as illustrations, maps, photos, and videos; realia can include those authentic objects that accurately represent the key content and concepts of the lesson (e.g., food, animals, and clothing); and graphic organizers used in a lesson may include, but are not limited to, semantic webs, KWL (already know, want to know and ultimately learn) charts, T-charts, Venn diagrams, categorization or classification charts, etc. (Herrera & Murry, 2004).

**Developing learning centers.** Centers offer EFL students the opportunity for extended exploration of theme-based instruction according to the ICB method (Herrera & Murry, 2004). Using centers involves the formation of several small areas around a classroom that provide activities to promote independent and active
student engagement (Herrera & Murry, 2004) when planning centers, effective educators consider a variety of linguistic, academic, and cognitive factors (Herrera & Murry, 2004):

- The ways in which the centers intentionally reflect the language and content objectives of the lesson.
- Student interpretations (e.g., how large or small and how collaborative do you want to make the centers to maximize the equipment needed for each center, including computers?).
- The familiarity of students with the media of the centers.
- Levels of support that students may need to successfully complete center activities.
- Length of time necessary to complete center activities (keep in mind the developmental levels and the attention spans of students).
- Length of time needed for the setup and cleanup of the centers.

**Assessment**

*Providing formative assessment.* Herrera and Murry (2004) commented that:

Herrera and Murry (2004) pay much attention to the formative assessment provided throughout the delivery of an ICB lesson. As an ongoing assessment, formative assessment should be specific, constructive and thorough. It could provide well-based evaluation on EFL students’ language performance and by doing that, the learning problems may be spotted and corresponding strategies be provided on time. Moreover, formative assessment allows the EFL teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of the EFL instruction, and based on the assessment result, modification on the teaching approach and content could be adjusted and modified.

*Providing summative assessment.* Herrera and Murry (2004) also provided a very detailed description for summative assessment:

Summative assessment typically occurs at the end of a project or a lesson. During summative assessment, teachers and students examine revised and completed student work to collect evidence of language and content development. Summative assessment describes and documents students’ proficiency levels in meeting lesson objectives. For CLD students, a teacher defines levels of acceptable language production based on the expected characteristics of the students’ level of second language proficiency. (p. 240)

**Why do We Need to Choose ICB?**

Due to the fact that more and more CLD students will be enrolled in our ESL program, ICB will be the effective curriculum for the improvement of student language achievement. The implementation of ICB requires teacher to incorporate the student background knowledge into the classroom, adapting different and effective instructional materials, motivating the student engagement into the classroom activities, conducting the effective classroom management, etc. The implementation of it in our middle school will engage students in the communication in English; in addition, it requires teachers to transform their old teaching approach into communicative and interactive one. The advantage of its implementation is obvious and evidence-supported.

However, the sufficient training to teachers of ICB is necessary to make sure the successful implementation of this curriculum. Teachers need to be provided with opportunities to observe the ICB classroom, attend the conference on the curriculum implementation, and be gathered together to discuss the problems they have met or will meet during the ICB implementation regularly, the process of which is the corner stone assuring the successful implementation of ICB curriculum.
Conclusion

Herrera and Murry (2004) at the end of their description about the ICB commented that:

Effectively implementing instruction according to the ICB methods takes time, practice, and critical self-reflection. Accommodatively planning for, instructing, and assessing CLD students requires special attention to their language development needs. For many ICB teachers, modifying the language of instruction without simplifying the grade-level content can prove to be a difficult skill to master. Yet, educators do not provide CLD students with the support they need to reach the same high standards as their English-speaking peers, the achievement gap between these and grade-level students will continue to widen. By soliciting the help of teachers experienced in this method or by forming learning communities with other teachers who are implementing ICB instruction, educators find the support needed to change teaching practice. (p. 241)

As a conclusion, ICB has been proved to be a very effective approach in enhancing the language and academic developments of middle-school EFL students. EFL teachers should fully understand the different needs of individual student and appropriately incorporate ICB into their instruction.

References


