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Author

Grinstead, John

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Interest, Relevance and Common Sense in Content-Based Instruction (a review essay)

The Content-Based Classroom: Perspectives on Integrating Language and Content edited by Marguerite Ann Snow and Donna M. Brinton. White Plains, NY: Longman, 1997. Pp. xvi+431.

Reviewed by John Grinstead
University of California, Los Angeles

In this survey of current work on Content-Based Instruction (CBI), the authors offer us a wide array of practical pedagogical suggestions and conveniently bring together a well-rounded overview of where CBI stands today. There are thirty-four chapters divided into three sections. The first section addresses "Multiple Perspectives on Content-Based Instruction" and makes up the bulk of the book. The second and third sections are titled "Practical Issues at a Glance" and "Connections Between Content-Based Instruction and Other Teaching Approaches". Most of the selections grapple with the details of implementing particular aspects of CBI in diverse language teaching environments. The topics range from different perspectives on how best to shelter the ESL curriculum in K-12 instruction, as in the contributions by Nina Gladini Rosen and Linda Sasser as well as Kate Kinsella, to a case study of adapting an adjunct ESL course at the university level, as in Martha Iancu's chapter.

Our task as language teachers, then, is to evaluate the suggestions provided. In order to make this evaluation, language teachers have frequently turned to researchers in other disciplines for criteria. Typical references are made to Krashen, Vygotsky, Bruner, and Piaget. While such authors have brought us thought-provoking notions such as the zone of proximal development, knowledge co-construction, and comprehensible input, we are eventually driven to figure out whether such notions are of any practical value in the classroom. I am convinced that the insights which undergird Content-Based Instruction are not only quite valuable, but quite justifiable without appealing to constructivist notions of communication or speculative theories of second language acquisition.

For example, group work in language classes and other environments is often justified by appealing to constructivist notions of communication (cf. Kaufman and Grennon Brooks, 1996). However, group work can also be justified by merely observing that people refine their ideas when they offer others the opportunity to

critique them. This critique of one's ideas is the essence of knowledge development and is as consistent with nativist ideas of mind as it is with constructivist notions¹. Similarly, there is no magic in the term "comprehensible input." While some aspects of second language are learned without explicit instruction in roughly the sense of Krashen and Terrell (1983)², others appear not to be learnable without explicit instruction in the light of immersion studies such as Plann (1976) which demonstrate the grammatical deficits of children educated even in elementary school language immersion programs³.

Given that the objective of generative linguistics is to characterize human grammatical competence, it is not surprising that generative linguists might have suggestions about how best to teach language. More pertinent to the question at hand, however, is whether generative linguists have any suggestions about how to evaluate research in language pedagogy. In light of the formal character of generative grammar, one might expect generative grammarians to offer suggestions involving syntactic trees, optimality constraint rankings, judgment relating to the degrees of ungrammaticality of subadjacency and ECP violations, or quantifier scope readings. In fact, at least one generative grammarian appears to have much different advice with respect to approaches to language pedagogy.

The truth of the matter is that about 99 percent of teaching is making the students feel interested in the material. Then the other 1 percent has to do with your methods. And that's not just true of languages. It's true of every subject. We've all gone to schools and colleges, and you all know that you have taken courses in school where you have learned enough to pass the exam, and then a week later you forget what the subject was. Well, that's the problem. Learning doesn't achieve lasting results when you don't see any point to it. Learning has to come from the inside; you have to want to learn. If you want to learn, you'll learn no matter how bad the methods are...The proper conclusion, I think, is this: Use your common sense and use your experience and don't listen too much to the scientists, unless you find that what they say is really of practical value and of assistance in understanding the problems you face, as sometimes it truly is." (from *Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures*, pp. 181-182, Noam Chomsky, 1988).

The three basic suggestions Chomsky makes in this informal exchange are: 1) that promoting learner interest is important to teaching a second language, 2) the learner must perceive the material as relevant in order for self-motivated learning to take place; the learner must want to learn, and 3) on the basis of common sense and experience, teachers can discern on their own what methods are most effective and should not be doctrinaire in their adherence to any particular theory of language acquisition, unless it proves valuable and relevant to overcoming pedagogical obstacles. In evaluating *The Content-Based Classroom*, we will not only see that its contributors fare quite favorably when judged by these criteria, we will see that these are in fact the criteria of CBI practitioners themselves.

Courses taught in the CBI framework attempt to hold the students' interest

and attention by centering the curriculum on some subject other than the specific grammatical and communicative skills the course seeks to develop. While determining what exactly is going to capture the interest of a particular group of students can be tricky, Christine Holten, in her chapter *Literature: A Quintessential Content*, provides several suggestions as to how literature can be used to accomplish this task. Holten makes the point that when a given content area outside the expertise of the student (e.g., Psychology for a Physics major) is chosen as the vehicle through which English as a Second Language will be taught, some students may become frustrated by the increased intellectual demands of reading in an unfamiliar discipline. While discipline-specific content carries this risk, well-chosen literature is less likely to because it is generally based on more universal themes which require no insider understanding of the discipline. She suggests that a literature unit may be taught in conjunction with a discipline-specific content unit, as in for example a sociology unit which addresses the behavior of groups taught in conjunction with Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954). A second alternative is to have an entire unit based on a literary theme such as the place of women in society in which the unit would not necessarily have any relation to the content of other units being taught in the class.

In my experience teaching a university level multi-skills course which included a Psychology unit on memory and another unit based on *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan (1991), I found that just what Holten suggests is correct. While many students were fascinated by the first unit on memory, there were always a few who simply found the subject matter too challenging or not interesting. These same students were frequently the most engaged in the second half of the class when our attention turned to the *Joy Luck Club's* inter-generational dynamic between immigrant parents and their US-born children, a subject with which our ESL population has much familiarity.

Hence we see that with respect to the place of literature in the CBI framework, Holten's primary objective is keeping students interested and engaged. Once students are engaged by the material, many opportunities for teaching grammar, editing, revision, and vocabulary present themselves. The logic behind such a teaching strategy is not only intuitively appealing, it works. Furthermore, while adherents to the ideas of Krashen or the constructivists may see confirmation of their theoretical views here, I fail to see how such views provide any insight beyond the obvious conclusions stated by Chomsky: interesting content engages students and is more likely to motivate them to want to learn.

An integral part of keeping students interested and engaged in a CBI course is presenting them with material that they find relevant. One kind of relevance comes from shared life experiences, so for example, in the multi-skills class I referred to earlier, a large majority of the students were Chinese. This is likely to have made the experiences of the Chinese immigrants in *The Joy Luck Club* relevant to them. In their contribution, *How Relevant is Relevance?*, James Valentine and Lyn Repath-Martos ask a slightly different question, however. They suggest

that if students feel that the *language skills* they are being taught are relevant, they are more likely to see the point of learning them and consequently have increased motivation to do so. Hence, they carry out a study to determine the perceptions of the students in one of UCLA's advanced multi-skills courses. Using questionnaires as well as intensive interviews with students, they found that large percentages of the students felt that the instructional emphasis placed on various skill areas was *about right*. (reading and writing - 81%, note-taking - 71%, and listening comprehension - 79%). The two weakest areas according to students' perceptions were grammar and vocabulary, on which 47% and 60% respectively felt that *not enough* time was spent. We will return to this question of teaching grammar below, but the essential result of the study is that students in UCLA's ESL service courses perceive their language curriculum to be meeting their needs. Following Valentine and Repath-Martos' plausible assumptions about the connection between relevance and motivation, such perceptions should lead to increased internal motivation and a more lasting learning experience, along the lines suggested above.

While generating interest and fostering internal motivation are goals of CBI, which appear to be well represented in *The Content-Based Classroom*, Chomsky's final admonition that teachers use their common sense and experience to evaluate teaching methods also seems well-represented in the research presented in the book. As asserted by the students interviewed by Valentine and Repath-Martos, grammar and vocabulary may not be receiving the attention they deserve⁴. In David Eskey's overview of the evolution of syllabus design, *Syllabus Design in Content-Based Instruction*, he traces the evolution of syllabus design over the last several decades and also echoes the concerns voiced by the students polled by Valentine and Repath-Martos. He cites the fact that when faced with a choice between fluency and accuracy, CBI typically chooses fluency. Assuming that form and function should be linked in language teaching, Eskey attributes this problem to "...the absence of insightful theoretical work on the relationship between grammatical form and discourse function..." (p. 139). Hence Eskey recognizes that grammar, or "accuracy" in his terms, does not receive enough attention in most current CBI. Eskey's review is a valuable contribution to our vision of syllabus design and its place in Content-Based curricula.

This underemphasis on accuracy is based in large part on CBI's tacit acceptance of Krashen and Terrell's (1983) "Natural Approach" contention that exposing learners to comprehensible input is sufficient in and of itself for second language acquisition to take place. Eskey's recognition of this short-coming is an illustration of "not listening too much to the scientists," in Chomsky's words. It is worth pointing out that there is nothing intrinsic to CBI which dictates that fluency should be emphasized above accuracy. Hopefully, Eskey's recognition that this is a problem is representative of a growing consciousness that teaching grammar is possible and necessary in the CBI environment.⁴

A final example of the importance of applying common sense and experience to language pedagogy can be found by examining the development of Whole

.....Language Teaching. Whole Language teachers David Freeman and Yvonne Freeman answer the question posed in their contribution's title *Whole Language Teaching and Content-Based Instruction: Are They Compatible?* by responding "Yes, absolutely!" This seems true to a great extent. The authors review elements of Whole Language Teaching and CBI which are certainly consistent. Both are student-centered and generally committed to promoting student interest in learning through relevant content. Freeman and Freeman suggest that Whole Language should be applied outside of the elementary school context in which it was conceived, and consequently advise the readers to not view all Whole Language Teaching as elementary school literacy. Such a comment is telling, however, because if Eskey's criticism of the lack of attention to form is valid for CBI, it is ten times more valid for Whole Language. If we ignore the authors' advice and focus on elementary school literacy, we see that while Whole Language practitioners have made important contributions by centering their curricula on interesting, relevant literature, and social critique, their curricula ultimately fail to teach the sound-symbol correspondences necessary for learning to read⁶. Many teachers, of course, shared Whole Language's contempt for boring basal readers, but were taken aback by the notion that grammatical form could be ignored altogether as a matter of curricular policy. The reaction to Whole Language Teaching has thus become an example of teachers using their common sense and experience to evaluate teaching methods, because while many primary school teachers were initially attracted to Whole Language for the reasons discussed, many are now including a more explicit sound-symbol component to their curricula.

Overall, then, *The Content Based Classroom* demonstrates that the intuitive appeal of teaching grammar, language, and communication using relevant, interesting content material, with the development of motivated language learners as its focus has flourished and expanded into many different learning environments over the last ten years. I would argue that this success is the result of employing a pedagogical approach grounded in common sense and experience, because while our understanding of how exactly second language is acquired is still preliminary, we, as language teachers, are nonetheless able to evaluate what works and what does not in the classroom. *The Content-Based Classroom* represents the next stage in the development of CBI. Where Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) argued for the underlying principles of CBI, this most recent volume demonstrates the wide range of applications of the method and also includes food for thought for the directions it may take. It would be a useful text around which to structure a graduate level methods course in a TESL M.A. program.

NOTES

¹ For a general critique of constructivism as well as its principle exponent's defense, see Piattelli-Palmarini, 1980.

² See for example Pérez-Leroux and Glass (1995) for second language acquisition of fairly subtle

aspects of Spanish grammar in the absence of explicit instruction.

¹ Non-grammatical communicative abilities, nonetheless, appear to be quite native-like for the same children.

² For arguments that this may be a misperception on the students' part, see Valentine and Repath-Martos, p. 241-247, *ibid*.

³ In this vein see Celce-Murcia (1992).

⁴ This unfortunate overemphasis on content, which leaves many students behind their non-Whole Language peers, stems from a fundamental confusion of first language acquisition and literacy. This confusion and similar misconceptions about "semilingualism" are rooted in the work of Cummins (1976a, 1976b, 1981) and are discussed at length in MacSwan (1997).

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