

# Teaching Grammar through Content-Based Instruction in a Second Language Classroom

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## Abstract

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is a novel approach that delivers a systematic preparation to acquire English language skills within a specific context. This paper demonstrates the basic postulates of how the elements of grammar are effectively taught by this approach. It brings a profound study of the essential characteristics of Content-Based Instruction that is well-suited to teaching language learners. In the case of both speaking and writing skills, the learner is expected to ascertain the nuances and the essentialities of the English language. A firm ground to the exposure of the grammatical regulations gives an edge to the learning language when it comes to practical usage. Grammar rules and regulates its stature as a sure foundation of language learning. Content-Based Instruction is an approach that aids young learners to imbibe listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and to utilize them in real-life activities. Content-Based Instruction is an amalgamation of content learning with its focus on English verbal communication. The major endeavour of the CBI is to provide learners with a grasp of the grammatical systems that functions in the language. One of the conditions that the CBI claims to fulfil is that it focuses on the use of the language in its form and function. Grammar is an unwavering referral point and maintains an undisputable position when it deals with the never-ending patterns of human utterances. Content-Based Instruction functions effectively with authentic content and continuously upgraded and trained tutors. This paper propounds that grammar has to be instructed by experienced teachers with inexplicit input from an expert who gives weightage to the practical and pragmatic application of the language, unlike the followers of the traditional grammarians and grammar-translation method who stop within the arena of teaching only by trying to figure out grammatical properties. By involving students in language study through interactions and various classroom activities, Content-Based Instruction has gained a position on its own in aiding learners to utilize the English language in their everyday application.

**Keywords:** Content-Based Instruction, Second Language Learning, Learners, authentic, English Language

## 1. Traditional Method of Teaching

In the conventional pedagogical approach, instructors traditionally assume the role of authoritative figures responsible for the dissemination of knowledge, skills, and competencies. This conventional model places significant emphasis on the teacher's central role in various teaching methods. Notably, one such time-honoured method is the Grammar Translation Method, which has been a steadfast presence globally for generations. The Grammar Translation Method is characterized by its emphasis on comparing learners' native language with the target language, with proficiency gauged by the ability to translate between the two. Despite its age, it remains in practice worldwide. This approach primarily teaches the target language through the lens of the native language, prioritizing the teaching of language structures and vocabulary over practical relevance and engagement. In the Indian educational landscape, the Grammar-Translation Method holds sway as the predominant method for teaching English. Here, paramount importance is given to the native language and grammatical accuracy, with teachers adhering to traditional roles. They diligently correct student errors, resulting in a predominantly one-way flow of information. Consequently, students tend to assume passive roles, mirroring the teacher's knowledge, albeit with limited opportunities for peer communication. This traditional teaching approach underscores the need for a shift toward more interactive and learner-centric methodologies to foster effective communication and holistic language acquisition.

## 2. Content-Based Instruction

Content-Based Teaching (CBT) is a well-acknowledged pedagogical approach within the Indian educational landscape. Its rising popularity can be attributed to its unique emphasis on the practical application of linguistic skills, ultimately assisting learners in achieving proficiency in a second language (Choudary, 2011). Unlike traditional language learning, where languages are often taught in isolation, CBT takes a distinctive approach by immersing students in a specific academic subject, enabling them to grasp language within the context of that subject matter (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This approach stands in stark contrast to conventional methods like the grammar-translation method. As Davis (2003) aptly puts it, "Content-based instruction (CBI) is about acquiring new knowledge rather than mere language proficiency." The success of CBT is evident in countries like Canada and the USA, where it has proven effective

through English as a Second Language (ESL) immersion programs (Hockett, n.d.). The inception of the Content-Based Teaching through Technology (CoBaTT) initiative in 1999, led by the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota, marked a significant advancement (Shah, 2003). CoBaTT gained momentum as it evolved into a vital hub, addressing the increasing need for instructional guidance and study materials (Entwistle, 2023).

The paradigm shift from focusing solely on grammatical rules to prioritizing meaningful communication was a pivotal moment in the evolution of CBT (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Instructors assumed a more demanding role, as the emphasis shifted towards real-world applications. It became evident that for students to reach their language acquisition goals, the classroom needed to foster interactive experiences (Kariya, 2012). Moreover, CBT recognizes the importance of preparing learners to comprehend the subtleties of concepts, opinions, and ideas expressed through an ever-changing media landscape and a vast body of literature (Gleason Jr., 1974). This approach equips young learners with the skills to engage meaningfully in the dynamic world of information and communication (Delbio & Ilankumaran, 2018). In conclusion, Content-Based Teaching has established itself as a transformative approach in the field of language education. Its success is evident not only in its widespread adoption but also in its capacity to prepare learners for the complexities of real-world communication in an ever-evolving global context (Rede, 2020).

### **3. The Basic Elements of Content-Based Instruction**

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) represents the fusion of specific subject matter content with the purpose of language education. Its foundational concept revolves around the notion that effective language acquisition occurs when learners are immersed in the target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In CBI, authentic materials are utilized, and the central objective is the acquisition of information and knowledge. CBI places a strong emphasis on linguistic structures, vocabulary, functional language use in everyday situations, and the practical application of language skills (Choudary, 2011). Learners acquire English within the context of their educational materials, harnessing their rational faculties of observation, investigation, and synthesis (Gleason Jr., 1974). This approach is inherently student-centered, aligning with the principle that language comprehension arises from exposure to real-life situational messages, rather than rote grammatical rules or tedious drills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Given this context, the question naturally arises: how can the grammatical intricacies of the English language be effectively taught to second-language learners using Content-Based Instruction? Content-Based Instruction operates on the premise that learners actively assimilate knowledge within the educational setting, nurturing essential intellectual skills such as perception, analysis, and integration. Notably, this approach diverges significantly from conventional methods employed in English language teaching.

Content-Based Instruction encompasses three distinct models, each represents a unique approach to language instruction (Shah, 2003). These models, namely the sheltered model, the adjunct model, and the theme-based model offer diverse perspectives for educators to engage students, fostering language acquisition within rich and meaningful contexts.

In essence, Content-Based Instruction represents a dynamic and student-centric approach to language education, fostering a deeper understanding of language by immersing learners in authentic, real-world content. Through its various models, it offers educators flexibility in tailoring their instructional methods to suit the specific needs and objectives of their students (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

#### **The Sheltered Model**

The model in question facilitates personalized assistance for learners, enhancing their understanding of regular classroom content. The sheltered model provides ongoing support to students as needed. This model involves the collaborative effort of two instructors, each contributing to the instruction of a specific subject. One instructor focuses on delivering subject matter content, while the other teacher provides language enhancement support.

In this model, the coordination between the two instructors is essential, and they can conduct classes jointly or allocate specific time slots to each of them. For instance, the content expert may begin with a brief presentation, leaving room for the language specialist to follow up and ensure that students have grasped key concepts, which can be revisited later if necessary.

Sheltered Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is characterized by its commitment to furnishing students with exceptional support, aimed at elevating their comprehension levels within their regular classes. The collaborative efforts of two teachers, one specializing in the subject matter and the other in English as a Second Language (ESL), allow for a dynamic and tailored approach to instruction. They may choose to co-teach, alternate roles, or allocate specific time segments for their respective contributions, ensuring that students receive comprehensive support to master both content and language skills.

#### **The Adjunct Model**

The Adjunct Model represents another approach wherein ESL tutors take charge of language classes. These classes are strategically designed to prepare students for their "regular" classes, where they will interact with native English speakers. Adjunct classes bear a resemblance to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes, with a strong emphasis on acquiring precise and targeted language expressions. Within the adjunct model, learners engage in skill-building sessions that acquaint them with listening and speaking skills, note-taking techniques, reading comprehension, and text analysis. These sessions typically occur during summer or winter vacation periods before the regular academic year commences. In some instances, language learning occurs concurrently with standard curriculum lessons, offering a comprehensive approach to language acquisition.

### The Theme Based Model

The Theme-Based Model stands out as a widely employed approach for instructing students learning English as a foreign language. For these students, English represents a new and unfamiliar language. This model, integral to Content-Based Instruction, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, provides a comprehensive framework. In the Theme-Based Model, English language instruction is typically overseen by an instructor. This instructor can be an English as a Foreign Language specialist or collaborate with a content specialist as part of a teaching team. The responsibility falls on these educators to select suitable subject matter, craft a coherent curriculum, and design engaging materials that resonate with the student's interests. Within this model, teachers craft a diverse course of study by selecting from a vast array of thematic topics. This approach allows for a tailored and dynamic learning experience, catering to the unique needs and interests of students who are embarking on the journey of learning English as a foreign language. Teaching grammar within the Content-Based Instruction (CBI) framework yields remarkable effectiveness when conducted by well-trained educators (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). When assessing the role of grammar in CBI, it becomes imperative to critically evaluate its advantages within the broader context of language acquisition. Content-Based Instruction is explicitly designed as an approach to language instruction that utilizes academic subjects as intermediaries. The pivotal significance of content in imparting language proficiency cannot be overstated, as the entire language learning structure relies upon it (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In this approach, the implementation of grammatical codes and rules takes a back seat, with minimal emphasis on regulations. This stands in stark contrast to the Grammar-Translation Method, where language instruction primarily revolves around rule memorization and subsequent rule application through examples. Content-Based Instruction mainly aims at the contextual instruction and pragmatic approach of the English language. It is instructing language in an explanatory mode within the construction of grammatical decree (Choudary, 2011).

Content-Based Instruction proves to be very effective in the advancement of the oratory skill of the learner and boosts the listening skills because language is obtained from reliable texts in genuine life circumstances. The validity of the learning matter gives in a direct improvement of the student's reading skill or the influence of understanding. It gives way in widening the intellectual capacity of the student. Ultimately, learners achieve an insight into the objective culture as well as specialized vocabulary. Content-Based Instruction is firmly based on its rationale that the English language functions as a medium to deliver learning content (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This subject matter forms a resource that is reserved for the aid of teaching mechanisms that encourage learning to take place. Content used helps in the development of language learning. Unlike the general tendency that is quite prevalent in the common scenario in the arena of teaching and learning setup, where an unnatural separation is obvious between the teaching of language and subject matter classes. This is seen in most instructive scenarios. Furthermore, it is an undeniable fact that the whole framework of the curriculum rests on the content. The method of teaching revolves around the content, rather than from the appearance, mechanism, or conditions. In actual sense, during Content-Based Instruction, the fundamental organization of language learning concentration is transferred from learning language by itself to learning language in the course of a related educational context. During the method of language learning, expansion capability is attained. In the act of erudition, the exact theme of study, such as law, business, or economics, the student gets to learn the language. Some of the benefits of CBI are as follows:

1. Content-Based Instruction (CBI) upholds a context-driven approach, where learners acquire practical language skills intertwined with relevant discussions within specific contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).
2. CBI enables learners to progress within their chosen field of study while simultaneously enhancing their language proficiency (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).
3. CBI places a strong emphasis on real-world application and tangible, human-centered skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).
4. CBI integrates a substantial amount of oral communication skills and fosters learner-centered instructional activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).
5. CBI offers greater flexibility in curriculum design and activity implementation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Content-Based Instruction fundamentally underscores the idea that language acquisition thrives in meaningful contexts. The careful selection of authentic study materials caters to students' interests, with content chosen primarily to provide cultural insights into their chosen fields of study (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The primary objective of CBI is to impart knowledge, with the acquisition of grammatical features often relegated to a secondary role, regarded as background information. This emphasis on communicative competence underscores the importance of effective language use in real-world scenarios.

Teaching grammar effectively within the framework of Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is essential for acquiring language proficiency. To grasp the significance of grammar, it's crucial to clarify its concepts and definitions. Often, grammar is misconstrued as a set of rules governing language, primarily its morphology and syntax. However, grammar has a multifaceted understanding. Linguists define it as a set of components, while phonetics focuses on the creation and observation of sounds. Phonology delves into sound combinations, morphology explores forms and word creation, and syntax examines how words form sentences. These components collectively characterize a language, without which it cannot exist (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). With the advent of Content-Based Instruction, language learning has evolved into a practice deeply integrated into second language teaching and training. Language is now perceived as a rich and intricate system of individual and group communication, acquired through meaningful interactions rooted in specific content (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Content-Based Instruction advocates acquiring grammar knowledge from subject-specific content. Grammatical forms cannot be acquired solely through intuitive exposure; explicit teaching ensures that all students have the necessary

foundation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Interaction, a core element of Content-Based Instruction, cultivates communicative classrooms. Initial classes may witness non-cooperative student attitudes, resulting in fragmented, ungrammatical language use. However, consistent exposure to English ultimately leads to the development of fluent communication, albeit initially ungrammatical.

In such educational contexts, the role of the teacher plays a crucial part in enhancing learning efficiency. Recognizing the strong connection between achieving high-level language fluency and the instruction of grammar, students who are learning English as a second language can attain proficiency through the implementation of Content-Based Instruction.

White (1987) asserted that acquiring grammatical forms solely through comprehensible input is unfeasible, highlighting the necessity of structured instruction to ensure that students grasp the essential structural aspects of the language. Additionally, Richards (1985) cautioned against relying solely on communicative techniques and approaches, noting that while intuitively appealing, they often lack empirical evidence to support their effectiveness. There is a scarcity of studies confirming that communicative classrooms yield better language learners compared to traditional instructor-centered classrooms. This gap exists because Content-Based Instruction tends to overlook the explicit instruction of sentence structure.

To address this, it is essential to explore alternative methods of integrating explicit grammar instruction to create a more effective English-speaking classroom. Elles (1990) aptly stated that a primary mechanism for language acquisition involves developing a precise understanding of grammatical features, which aids students in obtaining clear linguistic knowledge. Second language acquisition occurs through two primary means: first, a comprehensive understanding of grammatical features helps learners process grammatical input more effectively. Second, overt knowledge is utilized to construct planned utterances and analyze speech before production.

Effective language learning methods are crucial for implementing a task-based approach that enhances students' comprehension of grammar. Long (1989) identified four types of effective tasks: planned tasks, closed tasks, convergent tasks, and two-way tasks. Among these, two-way tasks, characterized by meaningful interactions, foster a deeper understanding compared to one-way tasks, emphasizing the importance of promoting interactive learning methods in grammar instruction. In planned tasks, students engage in organized verbal communication or are given time to reflect on their conversations. Teachers play a predominant role in facilitating negotiation during these tasks. Closed tasks lead to clear resolutions, while convergent tasks involve learners agreeing on a solution. Divergent tasks encourage diverse observations.

Content-based language teaching must integrate grammar tasks to promote effective communication in formal instruction. Two types of grammar tasks are crucial: one focuses on enhancing knowledge of L2 grammatical features, and the other centers on providing information. Grammar tasks aim to raise students' awareness of the grammatical elements of the L2. To achieve the dual objectives of supporting communicative competence and developing grammatical accuracy, explicit grammar instruction is indispensable. The selection of materials and teaching methods holds utmost significance in this context.

A content teacher takes up the full initiative in choosing relevant and interesting topics. Conscious designing is needed to congregate the scholastic and language development learner needs. Catering to the pedagogic needs, the chosen has to coincide with the topics such as tenses, passives, reported speech, question forms and so on. The topic of language study is taken from the environment that the student is familiarized with as every element is directly related to the academic subjects. For example, a student has to come to school on time. The language learner has to be familiar with the usage of passive sentences.

For example,

Rema was awarded first prize for elocution.

Fiza has been warned for coming late to class.

The learner has to have the exposure how to use indirect speech to provide information. For example,

The student informed that she will be on leave next week.

Tinat wanted to know if he could distribute the notebooks.

When a student is admitted new to a class, it is essential to know how to enquire with queries related words like- Wh, yes/no to verify related information in the school paperwork.

For example, What is the name of the school?

Which class is Turner in?

This has to be enforced with the help of class activities and group discussions which encourage interaction in classroom language learning.

Content-Based Instruction operates on the fundamental premise that students can discern language structure patterns through academic subjects, with a primary emphasis on semantics and communication. However, this approach poses notable challenges for learners. For instance, consider a nursing student whose curriculum covers diverse subjects like nutrition, anatomy & physiology, pharmacology, and medical-surgical nursing. Teaching functional language solely from content materials presents impracticalities, as the vocabulary used within academic subjects differs significantly from the language required for functional purposes. Consequently, focusing on the social and functional needs of learners becomes paramount. A nurse, for instance, derives limited practical utility from the specialized vocabulary of

academic subjects in their professional capacity. Therefore, Content-Based Instruction necessitates a shift in emphasis, redirecting focus towards the practical and social requirements of the students.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) promotes the acquisition of grammar in a natural manner, drawing upon content material and the learning context itself. This approach hinges on the development of cognitive skills such as perception, analysis, and integration. Alternatively, a task-based approach is instrumental in unraveling the intricacies of grammar. This approach is closely tied to collaborative work, enabling learners to construct longer sentences and engage in negotiations, encouraging grammatically sound speech comparable to teacher-led lessons.

Swain (1985) underscores the need for students to engage in "pushed output," emphasizing that the end result should be accurate, consistent, and contextually appropriate to cultivate advanced grammatical competence. Immersion classrooms, rich in intelligible input, offer ample opportunities for such output. However, certain areas still require explicit grammar instruction from teachers to refine high-level grammatical proficiency. These areas encompass subject-verb agreement and the nuances of phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions.

I had bread and butter for breakfast.

Two kilometres is a short distance.

I found out that we had run out of petrol.

The stadium was so loud that Sam wanted to run out from there.

#### **4. CBI in Teaching English as a Second Language**

Acquiring proficiency in a spoken language involves formal instruction, constituting a conscious and organized learning process. English, spoken worldwide, serves as a vital link connecting diverse countries and regions, functioning as the international language fostering global communication. Its pervasive influence across fields underscores the significance of English instruction. Learning a second language, in contrast, is a deliberate endeavour, not an innate acquisition. The process of second language acquisition encompasses comprehension, speaking, and writing, culminating in fluency. Teaching English, given its importance, presents a formidable challenge for educators. Motivating students and designing a curriculum tailored to their interests become paramount. The primary aim of English instruction is to master all four language skills. However, contemporary education often follows a sequence of Writing, Reading, Speaking, and Listening, prioritizing difficulty over ease. Consequently, students may perceive English as a challenging subject rather than a language. Teaching and learning English as a foreign language pose significant challenges for both students and educators. Nevertheless, recognizing its global relevance, mastering English remains a crucial pursuit in our interconnected world.

#### **5. Content-Based Instruction Approach Bringing a Transition of Language Learning**

The authoritative voice of the teacher is governed by stringent rules and regulations, thus fostering a one-sided, teacher-centric mode of education. The emphasis was predominantly on the teacher's role rather than facilitating the learning process. Teaching was revered as a high-status profession, with students expected to diligently follow their instructors' guidance and teachings (Smith, 2005). However, contemporary approaches, such as Content-Based Instruction, the Comprehension Approach, and Comprehension Input, have brought about a transformative shift in language learning methodologies. In the 1960s, James Asher's research underscored the significance of listening comprehension and honed in on the development of speaking skills among students learning English as a second language. Language acquisition initiates with comprehension and culminates in language production through applied learning. Spontaneous speech emerges only after students internalize an extensive understanding of how the second language operates, acknowledging that perfection is a gradual process akin to an infant learning a new language over time. Krashen and Terrell's Natural Approach, mirroring aspects of the Direct Method, prioritizes meaningful exposure to the target language over formal structure. Students are encouraged to develop communication skills and acquire vocabulary through comprehensible input. The approach champions the unconscious acquisition of language rather than conscious learning, a principle highly advocated in English language classrooms. Content-Based Instruction pragmatically enhances grammar teaching by promoting activity-based learning, wherein students collaboratively engage in various group activities and projects. Language learners negotiate, plan, discuss roles and outcomes, issue commands, and make requests. They may also deliver formal presentations, requiring a ceremonial display of language proficiency or engaging with an audience. The incorporation of a more explicit focus on pragmatics in content-based language classes allows for the integration of these highly productive areas of language teaching to a greater extent. Consequently, Content-Based Instruction aligns with the fundamental aspects of effective grammar teaching, facilitating a holistic approach to language development. This amalgamation offers an ideal synergy for advancing language learning in modern educational contexts.

#### **6. Conclusion**

A young novice who is trying to learn a language, tries to pick up fragments, its features from the recurring patterns. Specific instruction rendered by an expert grammarian leads the learner to face road block. Grammar is the life blood of any language. The manner to attain it is numerous. Grammar is essential. It cannot be presented in its crudest form. When a language is learnt in a non-didactic method, active classroom interaction and active learning are likely to take place. Valuation the instruction of language and content is a challenge experienced by all language tutors. Landslide focus is quite natural where, the poise is too often missing and the content spotlight take over. Determined and unambiguous spotlight on language forms is to be introduced in Content-Based Instruction classrooms. It lies in the hands

of the tutors to construct language forms more salient and illustrate their learners' interest and help the learners to acquire the second language features. A well-designed sequence of training activities move from framed to communicative merge content and language instruction and learning to be more successful.

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