

PROFESSIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSE WITH CONTENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical examination of a content-based professional EFL course, designed by Centre for Languages (CfL), BRAC University in Bangladesh with the objectives of improving students' language skills, content knowledge and professional attitude. How content-based instruction (CBI) develops students' language and cognitive learning are analyzed in Bangladesh EFL context with literature review. The outcome shows progress in students' language proficiency as well as their professional knowledge. A brief outline of the course with implementation process are also presented with the aim of focusing CBI as an effective way for creating motivated, enthusiastic and better learners.

Key words: content-based instruction, professional language course, material selection, teaching strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Content-based instruction (CBI) can be a mantra for designing syllabus for professional EFL courses as Stryker and Leaver (1997:5) comment that CBI can be a philosophical system; a syllabus design for a single course; or a framework for an entire program of instruction. Using CBI creates opportunities for students to know the content of real-life and acquire language skills by communicating in a meaningful way. It may open-up a door of opportunities for EFL teachers to create better learners with motivation, inspiration, and enthusiasm. This paper discusses a content-based professional EFL course with the objectives of improving language proficiency; acquiring content knowledge; and developing professional attitudes. The three parts of this paper gives a brief literature overview on CBI, presents description of the course with objectives, and explains the implementation process with outcomes.

II. DEFINITION AND OVERVIEW

CBI is the teaching of content or information in the target language with the aim of target language development. Richards and Rodgers (2002:204) mention, 'Content- Based Instruction (CBI) refers to an approach to second language teaching in

which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus'. Brown (1994:220) defines '.....content-based language teaching integrates the learning of some specific subject-matter content with the learning of a second language'. When contents are given emphasis, communication and exchange of information become vital, and the stress of learning language rules or learning grammar rules are replaced with a feeling of correctness. Thus language is acquired better and naturally with inspiration. So, teaching language without direct linguistic input is supported by many researchers.

CBI is an integration of content with language teaching aims which can be called concurrent teaching of subject matter and second language skills. Here target language is used as vehicle, through which the subject matters are taught (Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989:2-3). Shrum and Glisan (2005:78) note 'CBI uses the content, learning objectives and activities from the school curriculum as the vehicle for teaching language'. CBI contents may be work-related or academic subjects. Teachers teach subject matter directly by using target language. Thus, content becomes a means for learning target language, and target language becomes a byproduct of learning the

content, providing language and content equal emphasis.

It is believed that CBI has considerable potentials, not only for developing high level of bi-lingual proficiency but also for creating ideal conditions for both language and cognitive development which give instructional practices nurturing the relationship between language development and content learning (Lyster 2007:3).

CBI models

There are a number of models under the CBI umbrella: immersion programs, sheltered instruction, adjunct course, theme based teaching, English for specific purposes (Brown. 1994:220) etc. The discussed course has used theme-based language instruction to deliver its contents. Theme-based language instruction is widely popular and perhaps the most suitable for CBI. In this model, the language class is structured around topics or themes which form the backbone of course curriculum. It differs from traditional course in which topics are restricted to a single activity. In CBI Integration of four language skills is comparatively easier. Because when a CBI lesson is planned to teach, the teachers' task becomes to best present the topic or subject. In such lesson it would be difficult "not to involve at least three of the four skills as you have students reading, discussing, solving problems, analyzing data, writing opinions and reports" (Brown, 1994:221).

III. THE STUDY

The procedure of CBI course is explained below including the description of research population and course objectives in brief:

A. Research Population

The course was designed for development-managers who work at BRAC, a leading non-government organisation in Bangladesh which promotes literacy and initiates poverty-alleviation program in more than eight countries of Asia and Africa. This was an in-service residential course under Centre for Languages (CfL), BRAC University, Bangladesh. There were fifty students in two groups. Their average age was 38 years and average education was graduation from universities (16 years).

B. Objectives

Course objectives were:

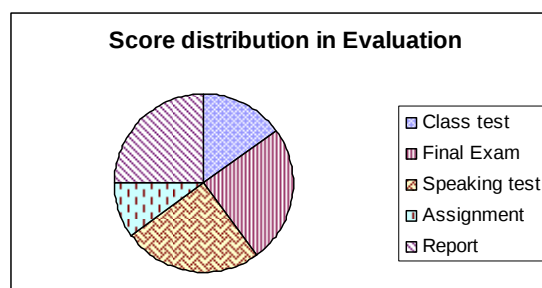
- To develop students' language skills
- To support students in acquiring knowledge in different social, cultural, environmental, national and international issues, and to analyze the situations critically
- To develop students' writing various work-related documents
- To develop their professional attitude

C. Course Duration and Evaluation

It was a ten week course with six everyday contact hours. There were all together ten units including a revision unit. Each unit had duration of 36 hours. A team of eight teachers who were all language specialists including the author conducted the classes.

There was a summative evaluation at the end of the course called final exam. Speaking proficiency evaluation was done by presentation/ debate. Assignments and class tests were considered as formative evaluation.

Students were evaluated according to group performance (25%) and individual performance (75%). (Figure 1)



D. Syllabus Design

Content selection was given priority during syllabus design to achieve the objectives since syllabus is derived from content areas in theme-based model of CBI courses (Richards & Rodgers: op.cit.). The ten units of the course were sequenced maintaining the relation and cohesive transition of certain skills, structures, concepts and vocabulary. Some of the units were informative while some units designed for practicing certain skills (e.g.

presentation skill, negotiation skill, report writing skill etc.). Description of each unit is briefly presented here:

Unit 1: Biography and Autobiography

The first unit of the course was designed to prepare students to tell about themselves mentioning their strengths and achievements with the objectives of giving self introduction. A lot of reading covering biographies and auto-biographies of famous people was done. Video of Mr. F. H. Abed's (the founder of BRAC) interview was shown as listening practice. Students identified types of information to be shared in public as while-listening exercise with a follow-up discussion as post-listening activities.

Importance of mind map was discussed as pre-writing activities and students wrote their autobiographies using mind maps and peer-checked. Finally students presented their autobiographies using graphic organizers.

Unit 2: Comparing and Contrasting

This unit focused comparing and contrasting opinions and ideas. Final out-come of this unit was a debate after a set of reading covering different areas (e.g. American and British English, parts of BRAC annual report, BRAC and other organization). The debate in this unit was a rehearsal for the students, prior to the one which they did to get score in unit four.

Unit 3: Process writing

Blend of reading and video-tapes showing working procedures of renown organizations working in similar areas to BRAC in Bangladesh was delivered. Video-tapes covered documentaries on garment girls of Bangladesh and activities of Centre for Rehabilitation for Paralyzed (CRP) as well as, audio-tapes on various social issues. Finally, students out-lined some processes which can be adopted to achieve millennium development goals in their country including processes they follow to accomplish their job-tasks.

Unit 4: Argumentation

Students were expected to attend donor meetings to convince donors for raising fund. They were also expected to support different management aspects of BRAC. So it was thought that proper

argumentation skills would be helpful for them to perform their professional responsibilities. This unit explained 'argumentation' as a skill and focused characteristics of good argumentation.

Students read BRAC annual report and found-out reasons why some certain programs should get more funds. The issue of foreign aid was also discussed, and they argued on refugee issue in Bangladesh. Students had to go beyond the process of memorising, storing, retrieving and they had to use their previous knowledge with analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating to formulate opinions. Students finally debated on 'acceptance of foreign aid by Bangladesh' as class activity, which was also a part of formative evaluation.

Unit 5: Project Proposal

Students required knowing writing project proposals, since they had been implementing projects, run by donors' money, accumulated through project proposals. At the beginning, student were shown a video named "Sand and Water" as listening practice with pre, while and post listening tasks. Impact of natural calamities on people's lives in Bangladesh was the content of the video. Students read about different donor agencies and expressed their opinions about those. Students identified problems of their locality and found solution and designed projects. Different sections of project proposal were discussed with writing strategies. The final out-come was writing project proposals in groups.

Unit 6: Interviewing and Questioning

Students read different environmental issues (e.g. desertification, global-warming, green-house affects, earth-day etc.) and BRAC's initiatives for the Sidr (a devastating cyclone with around 30 feet high tidal bore, took place in southern Bangladesh at the end of 2007) affected people and the impact of climate change in Bangladesh. An interview of Sheryl Crow (an environment activist) was shown as listening practice. Then, question-making techniques and interview techniques were introduced. Final part was designing questionnaire to collect data to evaluate an implemented project. Students prepared questionnaire on the basis of the project proposals which they had written in unit five. The activity was done in same groups, formed in unit five.

Unit 7: Disaster Management

Participants were sensitized about disasters that are happening due to global-warming and climate-change in different parts of the world. Video clipping on Sidr with devastating affect was shown as listening practice. A discussion was generated among the students focusing what more could be done to reduce the suffering of Sidr affected people. Surprisingly some students were involved in relief activities initiated by BRAC in Sidr affected areas and talked about their personal experiences. Students read handouts on disaster management which explained different kinds of disasters and pre-caution, preparedness and management stages to mitigate aftermath of disasters. Report writing was incorporated in this unit. Different forms of reports were introduced and finally students wrote reports using their project proposals, written in unit five and questionnaire, prepared in unit six. This was also done in groups.

Unit 8: Presentation Skills

The participating students used to give presentation in different official meetings and wanted to improve their presentation skills. Since the course adopted needs-based approach, this skill was incorporated in the curriculum. A number of presentation videos were shown for learning and discussing presentation techniques. Students did a final presentation after a lot of practice. This presentation was marked by the respective teachers as evaluation processes.

Unit 9: Negotiation Skills

Negotiation skill, a part of professionalism, was incorporated in the curriculum. This covered negotiation strategies, steps of negotiation, negotiating methods, qualities of a good negotiator, conflict management strategies, high context and low context culture of organization etc. Video clips were followed by discussion or presentation in almost every class including readings about negotiation theories and case-studies. Students discussed on negotiation-related issues (e.g. giving views on conflict in a negotiation, risk and potential benefit of conflict in negotiation, giving feedback in a negotiation process, advantages of listening carefully in negotiation etc.) and debated on support of high/low context culture of their organization.

Unit 10: Revision

This unit was designed to revise contents covered in previous units. Contents to be revised were selected through survey and discussion with the students. Some grammar points were also discussed in this unit because of students' recommendation.

IV. DISCUSSION

CBI follows CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) theory (Chamot and O'Malley. 1990:191) which emphasizes learning dependency on cognitive psychology and concerns how knowledge acquired, stored and retrieved. They suggest that active learners are better learners. Keeping this in mind, different teaching methods, strategies and techniques were adopted to promote better learning making students active considering their cognitive psychology as well as learning preferences.

A. Materials selection

According to Stryker and Leaver (1997:5), CBI is primarily based on subject-matter core; secondly, it uses authentic language and text; and finally it addresses the appropriate needs of specific groups. So, contents were selected from students' professions and work related areas, and language input was identified as per their needs. Materials (e.g. reading texts, videos, audio tapes, and visual aids) were selected from sources, produced for native speakers of English, which may be termed as 'authentic'. Students' office documents (A number of BRAC reports) were also used as materials.

1. Materials for reading-writing: Met (1991) proposes that '.....content in content-based programs represents material that is cognitively engaging and demanding for the learners, and is material that extends beyond the target language or target culture.' With this idea, materials focusing causes of poverty, poverty alleviation models implemented in different countries, environment issues and the impact of climate change in people's lives, pre-caution to mitigate aftermath of natural and men-made disasters, biographies of different social leaders, pages from BRAC annual report, information about donor organizations were selected as all the students were working in an

NGO. Students were found interested in reading from their own domain.

Learners' need was writing official documents where they need to indicate development of consecutive years using compare-contrast; to prove rationale of their work using argumentation; to raise fund with project proposals, to evaluate their projects with questionnaires and to reflect the outcome by reports and to suggest future strategies. All these topics were integrated in the course as writing skills practice.

2. Materials for listening- speaking: Students were expected to be deployed outside Bangladesh after completing the course, where they were supposed to give presentations as representatives of their organization. So, role-play, group discussion, expressing opinions, debate, interview and presentation were practised to emphasise speaking practice. Listening practice was also integrated evenly in all units. Presenting autobiographies; giving opinions about female colleagues; comparing different programs of BRAC; comparing BRAC and other similar organizations; debating; talking about millennium development goals, environment, social issues, donor organizations, causes of poverty; as well as numbers of role-plays were integrated in the course. Students used graphic organizer, an effective way for organizing and presenting information (Crandall 1992), to present their ideas.

3. Materials for other skills: Students were expected to have negotiation skills and critical thinking ability. Negotiation skill was incorporated in Unit Nine where students got opportunities to think critically and practice. To carry out these tasks, students had to function on an autonomous level, synthesizing information from a variety of sources and weighing the importance of the different pieces. Students wrote three journal-entries in every week as free-writing practice with reflective learning and did news presentation in every-morning as speaking practice.

B. Teaching strategies

As CBI follows communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, it is always learning by doing with handling real-life contents in a meaningful way. As with all good instruction, teachers of CBI course need to apply a variety of techniques and strategies to keep students engaged and to produce better learning with better participation. Some

techniques and strategies implemented in the discussed course are presented below:

1. Krashen's hypothesis: Krashen (1982) suggests that a second or foreign language is most successfully acquired when the conditions are similar to first language acquisition with little error correction; that is, the focus should be on meaning rather than on form; language input is at level "i+1"; and there is sufficient opportunities to engage students in meaningful use of that language in a relatively anxiety-free environment. CBI provides atmosphere where students can exchange information as they do in their first language, focusing meaning without any fear of language rules. The said course created atmosphere, where students became engaged in discussion, exchanging information and expressing opinion about their real life topics (e.g. presenting autobiography, talking about poverty, foreign aid, environment etc.).

2. Materials and techniques: One of the characteristics of CBI is using extensive reading, taken directly from the culture being studied. The important issue is not what those texts are but what the teacher does with them (Stryker and Leaver: op.cit.). If the teacher can effectively deliver the materials making them accessible to the students, most students can benefit from the authentic material though their linguistic skills are minimally developed. Another important part of delivering content is grading activities and utilizing variety of teaching strategies, which covers using context effectively, recycling and spiraling information, exploiting students' background knowledge using peer-work, teaching coping strategies etc. In the discussed course, materials were effectively utilized with efficient use of teaching techniques and strategies considering the level of the students. Pair work and group work was given to the students in every unit and students expressed opinions (e.g. about donor organisations, identifying problem and solution for writing project proposals, supporting victims of man made and natural disasters etc.) about numbers of issues where they could spiral information exploring their previous knowledge and learning.

3. Students' motivation: Students' feelings and emotional reactions (affective variables) are very important because students respond enthusiastically if they have the sense of achievement in working with real-life materials and real-life issues. In the course, students could relate their professional

responsibilities to contents. When they discussed about disaster management, some of them could describe their own experiences. They also could express their opinions while comparing activities of BRAC with other organization in the third unit. Teachers had to use a combination of “expository approaches” (lectures, reading, presentation, discussion) and “experiential approaches” (role-plays, workshop, simulation, field trip, demonstration and interaction with native speakers) to fit the selected materials with the students needs (Mohon. 1986:10).

Since after successful completion of the course students were expected to work abroad, they felt interested about the contents which would be beneficial for their future works. The sense of using the achieved knowledge in the real-life worked as another motivating factor. So teachers of CBI need to assess and adjust constantly with students’ affective needs and try to maintain Krashen’s (1982) “low affective filter”.

4. Cooperative language learning: CBI is a belief that learning occurs not only through the exposure of teachers but also through peer input and interaction. Groups of five members were formed in unit five for writing project proposals and it continued up to unit seven to prepare questionnaire and reports. The group-work was continued 108 hours altogether to accomplish academic tasks where students learn and produce collaboratively. In the whole duration of the course, students got plenty of opportunities to peer check their writing.

5. Serves Students’ needs: CBI is derived from English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and designed to meet specific needs of a group. (Tony Dudley-Evans, 2001:132). Stryker and Leaver (1997:11) recommend that if students can select the contents they become motivated as it serves their needs. Student generated themes or topics create an atmosphere where students take the responsibility of their own learning and the teachers become more a manager of students’ learning. To ensure this, the design of revision unit was done. The response of students was remarkable. Contents were selected as per students’ recommendation. Some grammar points were also addressed as their recommendation.

6. Language improvements: Firstly, it was evident in the course that students’ reading speed was improved highly as they took comparatively

less time for extensive reading after fourth unit. Secondly, the later journal entries were comparatively more detailed and more organized than the initial entries which proved the improvement of students’ writing skills. Thirdly, students were found interested in learning and prescribing topics for revision unit which proved the enhancement of their motivation, enthusiasm, and critical thinking. The next point noticed was the improvement of cooperative learning. In unit five to seven student presented some writings in groups which was considered as part of evaluation and this improved students’ group dynamics, meant cooperative learning.

V. CONCLUSION

Genesee (1994) suggests that traditional methods often disassociate language learning from the students’ real-life as well as from cognitive, academic, and social development. CBI brings these domains together.

This paper describes a content-based professional EFL course that takes responsibility of students’ cognitive learning of necessary domains with a blend of language and professional development. The outcome shows progress in students’ language skills as well as their professional knowledge which was possible due to careful implementation of the whole process with a group of motivated team and thus teaching through contents has become success and worthwhile for both students and teachers.

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