

Fact sheet – Enhancing language teaching with content

These fact sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with information on areas of professional concern. They provide a summary as well as identifying some annotated references that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

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Context

In an era when language teaching involves making meaning in the classroom, a question arises as to whether all ‘meanings’ are of equal value for learners in the AMEP. Content-based instruction (CBI) or content-based language teaching (CBLT), as it is sometimes referred to, is a group of approaches to language teaching in which language is contextualised in an area of knowledge that is of significance to learners. These approaches are often employed in school-based ESL or English for academic skills courses, where disciplines and subjects being studied are utilised for language teaching. Research and anecdotes from teachers report that these approaches are particularly productive, are highly valued by learners, and result in higher motivation because the learners perceive that they are learning content that is useful to them, as well as language. CBI has also been employed in adult ESL programs, and has been successful when utilised to a limited extent in the AMEP. It has been successfully used in the AMEP in a course for learner drivers in South Australia.

CBI has considerable potential to enhance the benefits that students derive from their participation in the AMEP. Judicious use of CBI can enable these learners to develop knowledge, understandings and skills, as well as language that will help them in their settlement into Australian society. This could enhance the impact on learners of their participation in the AMEP, and ‘add value’ to the language-focused teaching provided by the AMEP. Teachers who use CBI report that their learners seem more satisfied with and engaged in their learning.

The potential of CBI for teachers in the AMEP is considered in this fact sheet. The nature of CBI is explored, possible topics are suggested, and factors that teachers need to take into account in applying CBI are considered.

The nature of CBI

There are a number of different approaches to CBI that have been developed in different ESL (and other language) teaching contexts, and that involve systematic integration of language and content of significance to the learners involved. In some ways, CBI is related to English for Specific Purposes (ESP), but in ESP there is often an assumption (which may not always be valid) that students already understand the subject matter, and that they are learning English in the context of knowledge they already possess. In CBI, learners may not have had any prior learning of the subject matter under consideration. There is an expectation that teachers will be teaching the content *as well as* language.

Models and frameworks

Despite the variety of approaches to CBI, there are common characteristics to almost all approaches. These include: choosing topics or disciplines that are of direct relevance to learners; using visual material to establish understanding of content; integrating language around the texts and tasks that are commonly used or practised in that content area; and integrating conventional language-teaching techniques around these tasks and texts.

Much of the literature on CBI describes particular practices or experiences of teachers applying CBI in specific contexts. However, significant attempts have been made to articulate frameworks in order to be able to generalise and apply the practices of CBLT.

Program frameworks

In one of the earliest attempts to provide an overall view of CBLT, Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989) described three different ways of organising content-based language teaching programs:

- theme or content-based courses – in which all or most ESL teaching is based on content derived from other substantial areas of knowledge
- adjunct programs – in which ESL teaching supports the learning of students in a mainstream class
- ‘sheltered’ programs – in which a particular subject or discipline is taught in an ESL-informed and sensitive manner to deliver significant subject learning and language learning.

In the AMEP, CBI would be theme- or topic-based. To some extent, the teaching of the *Let's participate* citizenship course could be considered a form of ‘sheltered program’. As is the case in many sheltered programs, primary emphasis is on learning the content, with language learning having less prominence.

Curriculum frameworks

In another significant exploration of the nature of CBI, Snow, Met and Genesee (1989) considered how a content curriculum and a language curriculum could interact. From the interaction between the content and language curriculum, they argued that in any content-based approach some ‘content obligatory language’ could be identified. For example, in a topic on an aspect of the history of Australia such as *The voyage of the First Fleet*, past tenses and marking of the narrative sequence of the voyage would be a necessary linguistic characteristic. Teaching a particular topic may also give rise to a context in which language is presented that may not be essential to a study of the content, but which can be contextualised into that topic. For example, in the topic on the First Fleet, students could be involved in the learning and study of a song such as ‘Bound for Botany Bay’. Snow, Met and Genesee called such incidental language ‘content-compatible language’.

Classroom practice frameworks

While such generalisations may be useful for teachers wanting to better understand the nature of CBI, they do not provide concrete bases for action in the classroom. Accounts of the specific practice of teachers and the frameworks for CBI have common features, including:

- extensive use of visual material (such as pictures, diagrams, realia) to introduce topics, and as a basis for language development;
- modelling of texts that present the topic under consideration, using a style of language that replicates the way the topic is dealt with in formal study or in situations where the knowledge or skills related to the content are utilised;
- promotion of ‘exploratory talk’ by learners and collaborative activities of learners in discussing

and exploring their understanding of the topic or theme;

- language-focused exercises or practice that is meaningful in relation to the content.

Several frameworks have been developed for organising or structuring CBI in the classroom. These can provide teachers wishing to adopt CBI with some concrete starting points. Two frameworks are explored here, as both illustrate the ways in which subject matter, language and learning activities can be integrated to stimulate effective content learning of useful material along with the development of language skills. The first framework illustrates a highly structured progression and linking of input and learning activities around a narrow focus, while the second illustrates a looser structure for linking language and subject matter to cover a broader area of content.

The Cleland and Evans ‘Topic approach’

Cleland and Evans were pioneers of CBI, exploring its use in the New Arrivals Program for adolescents in Melbourne in the late 1970s and 1980s. They focused on topics, which are relatively narrow entities (such as *The life cycle of a frog*, *The voyage of the First Fleet* or *The life of the Buddha*), in contrast to themes, which are broader entities (such as *Families*, within which more specific topics or units could be explored – for example, a family tree, different types of family units, family celebrations, and so on). In each topic, all four macroskills are emphasised in different activities at different stages of the topic.

Cleland and Evans initially produced materials based on general science, because these topics provided an experiential basis for language work, and because many of their students already knew about some of these topics from their previous schooling. They then moved on to topics about Australia, as these provided important information and background for newly arrived immigrants, and were of interest to the students. Finally, they produced materials based on topics of significance in Asia, the region of origin for most of their students at the time, so that the students learned to use English in the context of topics of significance to themselves. In this way, these students could communicate about themselves, their background and identity to people they interacted with.

In Cleland and Evans’s framework, a topic is dealt with in four stages in the classroom:

1 The visual presentation

The topic is introduced using visuals. There is considerable emphasis here on speaking about the

topic, with students exploring their understanding of the topic by discussing the visuals, practising the spoken (and written) forms of new vocabulary, and verbally constructing sentences about the topic that incorporate the new vocabulary and key sentence structures for the topic. This then leads to the students generating written sentences about the topic, and the production of a tentative text that explains the topic, and that is intended to consolidate understanding of the topic, rather than mastery of the language that has been introduced.

2 Building a reading passage

Using a series of true/false statements, which they evaluate (and rewrite if false), the students are guided in joining, grouping and sequencing the statements so that a coherent written text explaining the topic is produced. The students usually work collaboratively at building the passage, and are guided to produce something closely resembling the model text. The model text has the characteristics of 'real-life' texts on the topic using the style of the discipline, or the type of text encountered in school textbooks and resources. This text forms the basis of the next stage.

3 Analysing and extending the reading passage

In this stage, the students complete exercises that focus their attention on linguistic features of the reading passage. These may illustrate how cohesion is developed within the text (such as the use of pronouns for linking), or how a prominent linguistic feature of the text works (such as adverbials of time in a text on a history topic). Students complete language-focused exercises to increase their fluency and accuracy in relation to these features. Sometimes students are introduced to another reading passage on the topic, and then compare how different texts may use different structures to deal with the same meanings.

4 Creating a passage

In the final stage, the students write a passage on an aspect of the topic, or a parallel topic, that echoes the features and style of the reading passage. So, in a topic on the life cycle of a frog, the students produce a piece of formal writing describing the life cycle of the mosquito; or in the topic on the life of the Buddha, they produce a piece of biographical writing on another person of religious significance. In some cases the writing could take on a more creative dimension – for instance, the 'life cycle of the butterfly', when students might also write an imaginative piece about 'My life as a butterfly'. It would also be possible for students to produce a relevant spoken text at this stage.

This approach illustrates a very tight and structured approach to the development of a topic. This basic approach could be applied to a relatively simple topic, such as the types of public transport tickets available in a city, and the texts related to them (such as the tickets themselves, and exchanges around the purchase of a ticket), or to a more extensive topic such as the nature of consumer rights and procedures for resolving disputes.

Mohan's 'Knowledge framework'

Canadian applied linguist Bernard Mohan (1987) organised a framework for teaching language and culture around what he claims is a common way of structuring knowledge in many different cultures. He identified six types of knowledge – and, consequently, areas of language use – that relate to any 'activity', a term that means anything which involves a combination of action and knowledge. For each dimension of an activity there will be essential visuals that illustrate the key concepts, and a typical text or texts that demonstrate the genres that are appropriate to that part of the activity. Further language practice may be integrated around these. The table below presents the nature of the framework.

Activity	
Specific, practical 'Action situation'	General, theoretical 'Background knowledge'
Description	Concepts and classification
Sequence	Principles
Choice	Evaluation

So, for any area of activity in people's lives, there are specific situations and courses of action in which people are involved. These involve specific situations, sequences of events and choices that may, in turn, alter the sequence of events. The way in which these unfold is dependent on the background knowledge and understandings of the participants, and on how they apply to the activity. By building an understanding of the genres appropriate to each knowledge structure, learners are able to use appropriate language for the different dimensions of the activities they are involved in.

Among the examples that Mohan and his colleagues provide, one is of particular interest for AMEP teachers. This is the example of an activity on car insurance, for a group of adult ESL learners in British Columbia, Canada. In this unit, the 'action situation' is presented by a series of diagrams that show a person buying his compulsory car insurance, going out on the road on a rainy day and having a minor

collision. The drivers exchange names and addresses, and the insurance claim is lodged. The conversations involved at each part of the sequence, as well as the insurance claim forms, are the texts relevant to each of the knowledge structures in the 'action sequence'. The unit of work then moves into a series of reading passages dealing with the relevant 'background knowledge', and related exercises in the form of newspaper articles or informative brochures that explain how the compulsory third-party personal and property insurance coverage scheme works, along with some discussion of research findings on the causes of accidents, and some comparisons of different types of car insurance and the merits and disadvantages of each.

As illustrated in the unit of work on car insurance, this framework lends itself to many aspects of life in a new country where learners need to be aware of how people may act in specific situations or locations, and to develop an understanding of the background knowledge and principles that impinge on these situations. The linking of specific genres to different types of knowledge and action provides opportunities to integrate significant understanding of how 'the system' works in Australia in relation to a variety of aspects of life. The range of options this may present to teachers includes 'activities' such as car ownership, public transport, access to medical services, community facilities such as libraries, applying for employment, or aspects of employment such as occupational health and safety. As Mohan is already using genre as the basis of linguistic focus, there is a clear conceptual link to genre-based curriculum and assessment frameworks such as the CSWE.

What the teacher can do

In applying CBI to the AMEP, teachers need to:

- 1 identify suitable topics or themes that will provide valuable learning for their learners
- 2 analyse the language learning demands of the area of content, and
- 3 devise suitable strategies for the integration of content and language in the context of AMEP classes.

Identify suitable content or themes for AMEP learners

The identification of suitable topics comes from considering the circumstances of AMEP learners as new members of the Australian community. This suggests some dimensions of the lives of AMEP learners from which suitable content-based work could be derived. Such topics would extend beyond how language is used in a particular context, to include the presentation and exploration of significant information

about the topic so that students better understand the nature of Australian society, and how significant aspects of the economy and society operate.

Such a starting point suggests several potential areas of content that could be exploited in AMEP classrooms.

AMEP learners as new members of Australian society

Areas of content that arise from this dimension include:

- some background knowledge about Australia – basic geography of the country, states or regions, significant places, and significant historical events (these could be considered at national, state and local levels);
- information and background about local and regional services such as libraries and other community resources, the services they provide and how they operate;
- features of Australia's physical and biological environment;
- the broad nature of the Australian legal system, types of courts and jurisdictions, or basic legal processes;
- aspects of the Australian political system at different levels of government, the ways in which national and state leaders are elected, and how decisions are made.

This could be extended into exploration of selected current events, debates about social issues and topics of public debate.

AMEP learners as consumers

This dimension gives rise to content related consumer education, and helping AMEP learners to make informed choices in their access to goods and services. Content that could arise from this dimension includes:

- some basic numeracy skills related to an ability to make choices in consumer contexts (such as calculating discounts expressed as percentages, comparing the price of goods sold in containers of different volumes);
- the nutritional value of foods and information about healthy dietary practices;
- widely used advertising techniques and procedures;
- consumer rights, and processes for making and resolving complaints;
- environmental issues and practices such as recycling;

- understanding the options and choices for consumers in relation to essential services such as housing, utilities (such as power, water supply) and banking.

Some more specialist areas of content arise from this dimension, such as different modes of transport (which could lead to content derived from aspects of the public transport system or work based on learning how to drive), topics related to health care issues of relevance to AMEP learners and their families (such as childbirth, or even the nature of the health care system), or the structure and philosophy of Australian education systems.

AMEP learners as members of cultural and linguistic communities

Content that could arise from considering this dimension of the lives of AMEP learners includes:

- the geography, economy and social structures of learners' countries of origin, and significant events and figures in their histories;
- being able to talk about cultural and, where appropriate, religious practices, attitudes, traditions and legends.

AMEP learners as learners and users of computing and Information Technology

- Basic information about computers and related equipment, and ways of using them, as well as use of the Internet.

Making comparisons between the learners' countries of origin and Australia can often be an effective way of connecting the dimensions on orientation to Australia with the learners as members of diverse cultural and linguistic communities.

Analyse the language learning demands of an area of content

When an appropriate area of content is identified, it is important to carefully analyse the language learning that arises from the topic. It is important to think of all aspects of language – relevant spoken and written genres, grammatical structures and aspects of pronunciation, as well as vocabulary. As well as thinking about the types of texts that learners may need to use in dealing with an area of content, it is also worth thinking about how learning about an area of content may be facilitated by using particular types of text.

Here, the notion of 'content-essential language' and 'content-compatible language' can be useful – there are features of language that learners will need to master in order to deal with certain content, and there are features of language that can be presented and illustrated in the context of work on that content.

Devise strategies for implementing content-based practices in AMEP classrooms

In developing an effective method for integrating language and content, teachers will find that the techniques of CBI are essentially those of communicative language teaching. The issue is to find ways of structuring and integrating tasks to first develop an understanding of the content in a way that is clear and relies on little existing competence in English. Once this understanding is established, relevant language (vocabulary, texts, structures, pronunciation and so on) can be introduced and practised, and then used for the learners to make their own meanings. This can be done in a number of cycles as different parts of a topic are introduced.

AMEP teachers are likely to want to devise their own structure for content-based teaching in their classrooms. The frameworks described above may provide a starting point for ideas, but whatever the starting point, the process of planning content-based teaching involves certain steps. While these are presented in a linear sequence here, it is more likely that a circular or cyclic planning process will be employed. There is likely to be frequent review and revisiting of each stage in order to refine a content-based unit of work.

Step 1: *Identify relevant content or field* of the topic.

Step 2: *Identify the nature of language used in dealing with this content*, and the contexts in which such language is used. A key feature of this step is identifying what is done with or through the new language. You then need to identify which of the contexts of language use will be of relevance to your students, and be of value in terms of providing language understanding and skills that can be transferred to other contexts.

Step 3: *Consider the current knowledge and understanding of your students*, both in relation to the content and the language arising from the content. In considering your learners' existing knowledge and understanding, you need to be sensitive to the fact that AMEP learners may have relevant content knowledge which they may not be able to display in English, and which they may not necessarily display in the ways that formal study of a topic may involve.

In considering the linguistic content and prior knowledge of a topic, you need to consider both the 'everyday', non-specialist language used in relation to the topic, and the specialist technical language or jargon that might be used in this field. While you may not wish to overload learners with specialist terminology,

neither should you ignore it if it is essential to effectively communicate about the topic.

Step 4: *Refine the extent and limits of the content and language.* This will involve identifying the visual or graphic material you will use to introduce the content to learners, and the key text(s) the learners will be working with, and the most crucial linguistic features of these texts. At this stage it should be possible to 'map' the nature of the content and the language to be covered in the unit. The texts that you use may be 'authentic', or if modified or adapted, they reflect the linguistic features or the real-life texts that learners are likely to work with.

Step 5: *Identify what language input and practice learners might need* in order to be able to use English in relation to the content in the target contexts. At this stage you are designing the ways in which you provide linguistic input and models, the nature of practice activities, and the productive and communicative tasks the learners will be involved in.

Step 6: *Structure the unit of work so that links are made between different tasks and activities.* It is useful for teachers to clearly understand when the main focus of a task is the content, and when it is linguistic, as well as the extent to which the connections between the different stages of the unit are content-based or linguistic.

Potential difficulties and problems, and some strategies for addressing these

Separating 'content' and 'language' can be difficult for teachers when they first attempt content-based approaches in the classroom. In daily life we integrate these two phenomena so naturally and intuitively that their interdependence can obscure our understanding of which is which. For instance, in learning how to drive a car, the 'content' is the ability to control the car (this content is likely to be learned out of the AMEP classroom), knowledge of the road rules and good driving practices, such as selecting which lane to travel in and driving defensively. This content could be realised linguistically in the following texts, which reflect different social contexts, tenors and modes:

- the manual of road rules produced for learner drivers;
- the manual of road regulations, as they are provided for legislators and law enforcement agencies;
- the road signs that drivers encounter;
- the tests that learners must pass to obtain a licence;

- the conversations people have about driving, such as the interactions between a driving instructor and a learner driver (which may be in a language other than English);
- articles in the magazines of motoring organisations that help drivers to understand the road laws (or changes to the laws);
- websites on learning to drive (type in 'learning to drive in Australia' on a Google search to see examples).

However, teachers could not deal with all of these texts, and need to choose those which have most relevance for the communicative needs (in English) of the learners, and which also have potential for language learning that expands the learners' overall communicative competence. In this case the road signs, licence test and texts providing information and advice for drivers may be the most productive to exploit in a content-based unit in an AMEP classroom.

It is also important to get the right balance of content and language in a unit of work. If there is too much content, learners can be overwhelmed by material they do not fully understand, and will not extend their language skills. If there is too much emphasis on language, learners will not develop knowledge of the content (ie its 'meanings') that is useful for them, and may not see the full potential of the language-focused learning they are involved in. Be careful also of hidden traps. For example, when looking at pictures of events in the past, the natural way of communicating about them is in the *present* progressive – as we describe what is going on in the picture before us now.

In order to get the right balance, you need to decide the limits you will place on the coverage of topic. Most topics can be covered in an extensive way if their content is fully explored. In CBI, the topic is usually limited to core concepts and information in order to avoid excessive complexity, and to allow for the connections with language to be explored in depth – intensively rather than extensively.

Thinking of 'language' as no more than vocabulary is another problem that can emerge if a comprehensive approach to CBI is not adopted. When CBI does not extend beyond vocabulary learning, learners don't learn how to effectively use language in the relevant contexts, and become dependent on those they interact with to interpret precisely what they are trying to say. You need to think of all dimensions of the language that arises from particular content.

Annotated bibliography

Literature on content-based instruction

Brinton, D., Snow, M., & Wesche, M. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction*. New York: Newbury House.

This classic overview of the field includes a discussion of the benefits of a content-based approach in adult second language programs. A useful chapter (Ch 6) gives advice on developing content-based materials, although the examples provided are for classes with a stronger orientation to English for further study than is generally the case in the AMEP.

Davison, C., & Williams, A. (2001). Integrating language and content: unresolved issues. In B. Mohan, C. Leung & C. Davison (Eds.), *English as a second language in the mainstream* (pp. 51–70). Harlow: Longman.

This chapter presents an overview of different ways in which content-based language teaching can be structured, as well as identifying issues that may be encountered by teachers using content-based approaches.

Ministry of Education, Victoria (1989). *Teaching language in context: the topic approach to ESL* (Video).

This video contains two programs that illustrate the techniques utilised by Cleland and Evans, particularly in the visual stage of their approach. The second program on the video is more useful in that it shows the progression of tasks and activities used in a topic on the life cycle of the butterfly, and illustrates the techniques they utilise at different stages of a topic, with an emphasis on student-based and collaborative work in the classroom. Although now a little dated, and related to a school context, the video provides a concrete illustration of an approach to content-based instruction and ideas for use in content-based classrooms.

Mohan, B. (1987). *Language and content*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

In this volume Mohan presents his rationale for a content-based approach to language teaching, and he illustrates his knowledge frameworks approach in the context of a unit of work based on car insurance for adult learners. A more recent overview is presented in:

Mohan, B. (2001). The second language as a medium of learning. In B. Mohan, C. Leung & C. Davison (Eds.), *English as a second language in the mainstream* (pp. 107–126). Harlow: Longman.

Some other chapters in the section that deals with Canada further illustrate applications of Mohan's approach.

Snow, M., & Brinton, D. (1997). *The content-based classroom*. White Plains, NY: Longman.

This volume contains a selection of articles covering many aspects of content-based instruction. It includes a section on using content-based instruction in post-secondary

contexts, and contains chapters that consider other frameworks for content-based instruction, such as the 'Six T's' framework of Stoller and Grabe, and chapters on literature and culture as possible types of content to be exploited.

Snow, M., Met, M., & Genesee, F. (1989). A conceptual framework for the integration of language and content in second/foreign language instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23(2), 201–219.

This classic article explores a fundamental feature of content-based approaches – the ways that the language and content curricula interact.

Resources on the Internet

Center for Applied Linguistics website:

<http://www.cal.org/resources/faqs/RGOs/content.html#digest>

This site contains some brief articles on various dimensions of content-based instruction and links to a variety of Web-based resources for CBI, including sites that contain ready-made CBI lessons (these generally require modification to suit the needs of particular classes and learners) and to the 'ESL Forum on-line' site: <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/journal/> (a US Department of State site that includes ideas for teaching CBI based on life sciences, civics education, peace education and environmental education).

University of Wisconsin's Center for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition website:

<http://www.carla.umn.edu/cobalt/>

This site contains articles that offer an overview of many dimensions of CBI, and provide general understanding of issues related to CBI.

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