Content-Rich Language Learning in Context-Rich Classrooms

By Cristina Escobar Urmepa

cristina.escobar@uab.cat

Understanding, expressing and negotiating meanings (that is, content) is the driving force of language learning. However, this well proven psycholinguistic principle is often neglected in foreign language classrooms. In this article the main principles of Content-Rich Language Learning are presented, together with examples and tips that may help teachers to implement those principles in their classroom practice.

1.- Why do we need Content-Rich language learning?

Content-Rich Teaching Units are teaching sequences designed to promote the learning and teaching of a foreign language taking bits of intrinsically attractive academic content as the starting point. This implies that it is the content to be explored (for example, Life in Ancient Egypt, Renewable energies, Pasta or Anorexia) which determines the selection of the language items that will be presented and practiced.

According to Mohan (1986),

A language is a system that relates what is being talked about (content) and the means used to talk about it (expression). Linguistic content is inseparable from linguistic expression. But in research and in classroom practice, this relationship is frequently ignored. In subject matter learning we overlook the role of language as a medium of learning. In language learning we overlook the fact that content is being communicated (p.1).

The human brain—and believe it or not, pre-adolescents and adolescents are human beings and do have a brain—is designed to decode linguistic input for meaning in the first place in order to achieve successful communication. Only when the content has been successfully deciphered—or composed into an utterance—does the brain release resources to work on those formal traits of the language that build the message up, and which make it comprehensible, accurate, coherent, appropriate, consistent or appealing. However many pedagogical proposals to foreign language teaching and learning tend to disregard this core principle. Let’s take the example of the well known sentence “My tailor is rich”, which has been frequently parodied for its utter implausibility. Language teaching approaches have made great progress since the seventies of the last century, when the boom of the Assimil method was at its peak. Or have they? Table 1 presents a collection of sentences extracted from language practice exercises in best selling coursebooks commonly used in secondary education in the past decade. A critical humorous look into the content conveyed by these sentences may shed light on this respect.

1 Work supported by the MICINN (R+D+i EDU2010-15783 project).

Cristina Escobar has taught English as F.L in primary and secondary Education and has been involved in the development and implementation of a number of teacher education programmes. Currently she holds a permanent position as a researcher and teacher educator at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, where she coordinates the English branch of the Pre-service Secondary Teacher Education Masters Degree and a CLIL Module, within the research Master Course in Teaching Languages. Her main interests are the teaching, learning and assessment of Oral Communication, Portfolio Assessment, CLIL, and Empowering Approaches to Teacher Education.
As in the Assimil method, it is clear that these sentences appear in the coursebook not because of the content they convey (they are meaningless), but because they illustrate a certain grammar point, which becomes the main or even the only goal of language teaching and learning. If the reader goes back a few paragraphs and revises Mohan’s definition of language, she will probably come to the conclusion than to teach the former sentences and to teach a language are two very different things.

The point I’m trying to make is that when course or lesson planning begins by identifying grammar points (structures), which are subsequently fit into sentences and texts, what you obtain are sentences like the preceding ones or texts on horoscopes, celebrities or nonexistent rock groups which are good at displaying instances of the grammar under focus, but useless to teach how to put one’s meanings into words: the true objective of a foreign language classroom. But is there an alternative?

The terms Content-Rich Language Learning (CRLT) and Content-Rich Teaching Units (CRTU) (Fisecar& Urmeneta, 2010) have been coined to label different samples of good practice observed in foreign language lessons taught by English teachers, some of which will be given credit later. Many of these teachers report that they became interested in the Content-Rich approach to planning and teaching after having observed the interest that some academic topics in CLIL courses arouse in their learners when approached in meaningful ways. Others, just because they tried to find a way out of the boredom caused by the well-known double spread on present perfect which the coursebook presents to learners year after year (and that they never seem to master). The Content-Rich approach shares its main principles with the Content-based approach initiated in the eighties in the USA. The main difference between one and the other is that the latter was developed to cater for the linguistic needs of immigrant students with low English proficiency (LEP) schooled in the American system, while the former offers a model for planning and implementing EFL teaching units.

The main difference between CLIL and CRLT is that CLIL is used to refer to lessons taught by content teachers in slots labelled other than language, whereas CRLT is taught by English teachers in slots labelled “English”. The truth is that the younger the students are, the more blurred become the borders between one and the other, as wisely noticed by Felip Falcó (2011).

But does academic content really attract young learners and adolescents? There are different factors that may contribute to success or failure in the implementation of the approach. Two of them are extremely important: the topic itself and the task set to the learners.

2.- What sort of Content-Rich topics for foreign language classrooms?

Content-Rich Language Learning is against the profusion of trivial subjects that pack coursebooks. CRLT is also against trivialising significant topics. This implies avoiding tackling relevant issues without the necessary rigour (dolphins being described as ‘fish’, for example). Or, needless to say, as a mere excuse to display and practise any given morphological feature. So what sort of content topic will work in the English classroom?

Almost any topic, if presented appropriately, can gain the favour of the students without being trivialised. Evnitskaya (Accepted) shows that presenting information about the
Homo Sapiens Sapiens in certain ways made it possible for learners to easily relate our ancestors' accomplishments and struggle for better living conditions to the students' own way of life and to their personal concerns. If the school has a strong CLIL project, the English teacher (ET) usually works in collaboration with the content teacher (CT), and if so, the ET will probably work following to a large extent the subject-matter programme. For example, designing a number of activities that will help provide linguistic and conceptual support to the students when they face the challenges set in the content classroom. Teaching materials following this approach have been successfully designed and implemented by a variety of teachers. Eixarch (2011) for example, designed a webquest on vertebrates, where students could practice and improve the reading skills necessary for the CLIL science classroom. Another example of collaboration between the language and the content teacher is presented in Pallarés & Petit (2009). However, Content-Rich lessons are taught by many English teachers in non-CLIL environments as part of the ordinary work carried out in their classrooms. In this case, the ET has more freedom and will probably choose a topic taking into account not only the curriculum in a broad and imaginative sense, but also the interests of her students and her own interests as well. It is clear that if a teacher does not feel anything special when listening to Reggae it is quite unlikely that she can make her students interested in it. Some teachers opt for introducing topics that will be useful for their students in the near future. Pelaez for example organises simulations on how to create a new company, a content to be covered in a more academic way in Business Studies the following term (Eixarch & Pelaez, forthcoming).

Content-Rich Language Learning is against the profusion of trivial subjects that pack coursebooks.

Topics that have proved to be successful among primary and secondary students are:
- Water (Medina & Serra, 2012)
- Rainforests (CLIL-SI, 2006)
- The Road 44 (Parellada, forthcoming)
- Painting landscapes (Meneses, 2011)
- Chemicals in Everyday Life (Fuentes & Hernández, 2010)
- Environmental Art (Jorge, 2008)
- Ancient Rome (Barrull, 2007)
- Musical Theatre (Dios; 2008)
- Extinct Animals (Balle, 2008)
- Roman Hispania (Barrull, 2008)
- The African Savannah (Escobar Umeneta, 2001)
- A trip back to Ancient Greece (García Antón et al., forthcoming)
- Eixarch & Pelaez, forthcoming).

Fifty more topics worth trying may include:

1. A Medieval Castle
2. Africa
3. Amazing insects
4. Animal weapons
5. Apes
6. Apples
7. Banking
8. Bats
9. Bees
10. Birds
11. Butterflies and moths
12. China
13. Colour
14. Dolphins
15. Earthworms
16. Electricity
17. Fabrics
18. Fire
19. Trees in the neighbourhood
20. Fossils
21. Frogs
22. Glass
23. Heroes of our time
24. Measuring
25. Metals
26. Middle Ages
27. Money
28. Mozart
29. Oceans
30. Oranges and Lemons
31. Paper
32. Plastics
33. Poisonous animals
34. Ponds and rivers
35. Pyramids and mummies
36. Reggae
37. Reptiles
38. Rocks and stones
39. Sharks
40. Snakes
41. Spiders
42. The Aztecs
43. The Incas
44. The life of a Masai boy
45. The life of a Quechua girl
46. The moon
47. The poles
48. The Sahara desert
49. The sun
50. Whales
3. Content-Related Tasks for the Content-Rich Classroom

The most intrinsically interesting topic can become a bore if approached in a de-contextualized or exceedingly scholastic way. Thus, activities such as 'summarize the text in your own words' or 'write the verb in the appropriate tense' will probably lead to a lack of interest on the part of the learners even if the text being dealt with is a breathtaking narrative about the Vikings. We all know that in the vast majority of cases, these exercises have a lot in common with the good old 'My tailor is rich' type of practice.

On the other hand, a well-designed task can turn unenthusiastic students into eager learners wanting to know more about whatever. Jimenez & Bazoco (2009) demonstrated this in their adaptation of a unit on Pressure for a group of fifteen-year-old students with special needs. The reaction of the students in the first lesson clearly showed that Pressure was far from being a favourite topic for them. A couple of experiments later, the most reluctant students were fighting for their turns to try and explain in their broken English what they had observed. Those experiments consisted of a) watching how some objects submerged in water floated while others didn't (peeled and unpeeled oranges among others); and b) observing that the water level rose when an object was immersed in it. It's important to remark that this was possibly the first time the students with special needs were offered the opportunity to put meaning into English words and they took up the gauntlet. It also needs to be acknowledged that the experiential approach combined with the scaffolding provided by the teacher helped the students utter meaningful sentences in English, and this produced a feeling of real success that completely changed their attitude towards English.

In short, a well-chosen topic calls for a well designed task. One that fulfils the four criteria identified by Skehan (1998):

- **Meaning is primary**
  - There is a goal which needs to be worked towards.
  - The activity is outcome-evaluated.
  - There is a real-world relationship (p. 268).

There are countless types of tasks that fulfill the previous criteria and combine different degrees of active involvement on the part of the learners plus a real need to talk and/or read and/or write about whatever the topic under discussion. Here are just a few examples:

- Video-recording of an oral presentation on bullying (Escobar & Sánchez, 2006) to be shown to younger learners.
- Solving a 'complex problem', for example, to create a week-long menu of meals for a diabetic person which does not exceed 100€, plus develop an exercise program to help them maintain a normal weight. Each team is assigned a different consumer profile (Adapted from Matt, Noel). http://www.uwsp.edu/education/lwilson/lessons/problem%20solving/db7mn.htm

Watching a *youtube* documentary on Macbeth and discussing in teams a set of four controversial statements about Lady Macbeth. Reading (jigsaw reading, perhaps?) the biography of Galileo and react to it. Matching hazard pictograms to their meanings (Fuentes & Hernández, 2010).

In groups of three, retelling the story of Little Red Riding Hood using the first person. Student A retells it from the point of view of the girl. Student B retells the story from the point of view of the wolf. Student C listens and reports to class.

- Drawing a picture of the African savannah against the clock using only four coloured felt-tips: one per student in the group. After that, writing against the clock a brief description of this type of biome and reporting to the class (Escobar Urmeneta, 2002).
- E-mailing peer students in an Inuit community and exchanging information with them (Vidal, 1998).
- Critically reading a number of advertisements on slimming diets and spotting the tricks advertisers use to sell products (Sanzrari & Oliveras, 2011). Miracle English learning courses would also make an interesting topic of analysis.

- Listening to a teacher explanation on colonialism and doing an associated task.
- Finding information about Mozart and completing a quiz.
- Writing a quiz about Mozart to test another group.
- Drawing the sketch of a pyramid and preparing an explanation to present the class.
- Designing and/or playing trivia contests on Impressionism.
- Writing a letter to the Council of Europe to convince them to fine the Town Council for the pollution in your town.
- Running a dictation on the characteristics of the Casa Milà (the monument to be studied next week in Social Studies).
- Writing a *do's and don'ts* list on saving energy at home. Reading aloud one particularly interesting text on Frida Kahlo and discussing some aspects of her life and how it influenced her paintings.

How many more can you think of in five minutes?

The reader will surely have noticed that all tasks listed above are defined by a topic. Content and task need to combine well.

4. Content-obligatory and content-compatible language

In the foreign language classroom, catering for language is important because of its primary focus on language learning.
The way language is understood in CRLL simply goes far beyond tenses, phrasal verbs or superlatives.

The concepts Content-obligatory and Content-compatible language were coined by Snow, Mcc & Genesee (1989) and have more recently been developed by Gajo (2007, 2011). They help the language teacher to set communicative goals and identify the language which serves the development of any given topic.

**Content-obligatory** refers to language bits or language skills which are indispensable to develop and discuss any given content.

Once the academic content is established, a process of **needs analysis** begins. That implies that the teacher needs to identify the **language items** which are essential or, at least, useful for the development of the content-topic and the fulfillment of the learning tasks. For example, argumentative texts are consubstantial to History and it would be almost impossible to teach any historical context without making use of this genre.

On the other hand, one cannot talk and learn about Ancient Rome without using the terms 'empire', 'aqueduct', 'bath', 'villa', 'slave' and some other lexical items. Some time expressions will be also indispensable, for example, 'in the first century', 'BC', 'AD', 'five years later', etc. Sentence connectors and phrases expressing cause-effect relationship among historical events are also essential in the teaching of any History topic: 'They lost the battle due to casualties, disease and desertion.'

Last but not least, students won't be able to carry out the task or at least carry it out in English—if they don't have the language they need at hand to negotiate among them their roles in the group, manage tasks and time, and sort out problems that may emerge as a result of the collaborative process.

**Content-compatible** refers to language and language skills which are not absolutely indispensable but fit well in the topic to be taught. For example, Roman mythology makes an excellent opportunity to learn to read or tell stories. Therefore, the language of narrative fiction can very well be taught when teaching Rome, even if it is not 'indispensable' in stricto sensu.

### 4. How does language planning work in Content-Rich environments?

As has been suggested above, there are, at least, three heterogeneous blocks of language foci to be considered when deciding what the content-obligatory or content-compatible language is for any given Content-Rich Teaching Unit:

1. **The discourse genres and text typologies** that will be handled by students in the learning tasks. We include here monologic (speech) and dialogic conversation) texts, in the oral or written modes. In some cases, the learning goal will be that the students understand a given text, speech, documentary (comprehension). In others, the students will be asked to participate in a conversation (interaction), also give a mini-talk or write a text (production). Some examples that illustrate genres and text types common in academic life are:

   a. The sequential explanation of the cycle of water (explanatory).
   b. The description of a certain type of flower / a Roman bath / a volcano (descriptive).
   c. The definition of 'opera' or 'rainforest' (definitions).
   d. A lab report (report).
   e. A formal presentation on the consequences of not recycling properly (formal argumentation).
   f. An informal conversation where you try to persuade a friend not to pour oil down the sink drain (informal argumentation).
   g. The story of Cleopatra (biographical narrative).
   h. Instructions to solve a geometry puzzle (instructional).
   i. A commercial on a magical slimming diet (persuasive).
   j. Expressing feelings about a shocking piece of news (personal response).
   k. ...

Sensible content teachers are sensitive to teaching genre and text types. It is difficult for students to acquire these sophisticated academic skills on their own without the guidance of the teacher. Language teachers are excellently equipped to play that role. Jorba et al. (1998) present an interesting reflection on this respect.

2. **Items related to the regulation of the task, negotiation of roles, and the use of pragmatically appropriate language**. This language is closely related to the development of the personal and social skills necessary to get the task done when working in pairs or in teams. The video-recorded conversations we have collected while students carry out tasks in pairs or small groups show two important findings: a) Making explicit that this language forms an important part of the course, contributes to increasing the percentage of target language that students use when solving tasks autonomously. And more important b) students in teams who display appropriate language skills to negotiate, regulate, self- and other and protect each other's face. Unfortunately, very few courses take explicit care of these language skills. Examples taken from peer-to-peer interactions recorded by members of the CLIL-SI team are:

   a. What do we do now? (getting organised; interpreting instructions).
   b. I'll be the organiser, OK? (getting organised; negotiation of roles).
   c. Why don't we do this? (making suggestions).
   d. It's my turn (turn-taking).
   e. You're right (agreeing).
   f. Are you sure? (disagreeing).
g. We’re a good team (establishing a common identity as a team; encouraging or acknowledging cooperation);
h. I don’t understand this (asking for help);
i. That was good! (face-saving strategies);
j. In English, please (reminding the rules).

Interesting teaching materials to activate this language and the associated social skills can be accessed at the Thinking Together Project, coordinated by N. Mercer.

3.- Lexis and morphosyntax

a.- Prêt à porter language forms, simple and complex sentences or embedded clauses which are often characteristic of one particular academic domain. Let’s take for example the experiment of the peeled and the unpeeled oranges submerged in water. As in any other scientific experiment, students will be asked to hypothesise about the outcomes of the experiment. The linguistic form required to do that would be something like:

If we put the peeled orange into the bowl, will it sink or will it float?

Learning to understand and produce this sentence does not require mastering the whole paradigm of conditionals in English. Other examples of complex expressions that in a first stage can be offered to learners for immediate contextualised use are: Tombs were carved into bedrock (no need to focus on the passive voice as such; see language awareness section); Or The Vikings reached Constantinople (Turkey), where they met people from Africa, Arabia and Asia (no need at this point to present and practice all possible variations of relative clauses, but it is important that students understand that “where” refers to “Constantinople”).

b.- Terminology, collocations, several word expressions or chunks which are characteristic of academic discourse: libretto; conquer; skeletal system; kingdom; endangered fauna; dramatic intensity; stamina; it’s got a round shape and bright colours.

c.- Connectors: However; was due to; In relation to; is caused by; “resulted in”, etc.

d.- Formulaic language: We are going to talk about; We can conclude that; Thank you for your attention.

An updated version of the CLIL-SI planning template that considers and organises these categories is available at Escobar Urmeneta, C. (Coor.). (2012).

5.- Language Awareness Tasks for the Content-Rich Classroom

As the planning of the Content-Rich Teaching Unit progresses, language awareness tasks which focus on lexical, pragmatic, discourse, morphological, syntactical or stylistic features may be built-in in order to help learners discover how some particular aspects of communication, closely related to task and content, function. Focus on these formal aspects will help learners to improve their performance.

Some sample activities of this sort are:

a.- Classifying sentences with the word “pressure” into sentences where the term is used in a scientific way and sentences where it is used in a non-scientific way (Eixarch & Peláez, forthcoming).


c.- Editing the content and grammar mistakes of a set of sentences on biodiversity.

d.- Deciding whether a set of utterances were produced in a formal or an informal context.

e.- Deciding whether an utterance was rude or not in that particular context.

f.- Finding alternative ways of giving bad news.

g.- Circling all the personal pronouns on a text and drawing arrows to their respective antecedents.

h.- Splitting up a long compound sentence into shorter sentences, making the necessary changes.

i.- Circling all the connectors on a text and substituting them by other with similar meaning.

j.- Finding cognates on a text.

k.- Finding all the words conveying positive connotations.

l.- Rewriting sentences substituting some academic terms by colloquial ones (or vice-versa).

m.- Finding all the passive forms in a text (i.e. Tombs were carved into bedrock) and re-writing the former sentences in the active voice.

n.- Playing an adapted version of Taboo (guessing the word being defined by one’s peer) with specific terminology related to the topic.

How many more language awareness tasks can you add?

6.- To conclude

Some time ago, in an interview the folk singer Raimon gloomily recalled his early experiences at school:

“The teacher cared more for letters than words. He cared more for words than sentences. More for sentences than paragraphs and, eventually, he didn’t give a damn what the essay was about”.

Foreign language teaching in Spain has been accused of excessive formalism. Raimon’s anecdote and the opening quote by Mohan suggest that the problem exceeds the domestic scale and foreign language teaching.

In any case, it is certain that the time has come to balance the weight that content and the means to convey that content have in the teaching of English as a foreign language. This balance is only possible when the starting point for the lesson plan is the content, that is, the meaning that will be talked about. Catering for the language that will allow the learner to convey that meaning is essential but comes at a later stage in planning.

Although every teacher on earth might subscribe this very general statement, it is convenient to be on guard against proposals that disguise the practice of isolated morpho-syntactic
Foreign language teaching in Spain has been accused of excessive formalism (Skehan, 1998), measured by the achievement of progressive competence levels of interactional competence, that is in accuracy, comprehensibility, coherence, appropriateness, consistency, turn-taking skills, rhetorical effect and other communicative sub-skills, we may be certain that we are on the right track.

REFERENCES


ELT Convention


Electronic publications of Content-Rich Teaching Units and Teaching Materials.


* * *
CONTENT-RICH Language Learning

TEST YOURSELF

1. When challenged by a difficult message, the human brain pays attention to the content first. Later, if there is time and capacity, it may also pay attention to the formal features of the message. TRUE FALSE

2. Content-Rich lessons are usually taught by content teachers. TRUE FALSE

3. The starting point in planning a Content-Rich lesson is to identify a language focus. Then, find a suitable topic to exemplify and practice the language item in a realistic way. TRUE FALSE

4. Language practice in Content-Rich classrooms is closely associated to discourse genres (explanation, definition, report, debate, instructions, etc.), and to text types. TRUE FALSE

5. In CRL, progress is seen as the capacity to evolve from producing, for example, a short, simple, explanation, full of mistakes and L1 expressions, to a longer, more elaborate one, with different types of mistakes. TRUE FALSE

6. Practicing formal language traits (comparatives, past continuous, connectors, etc.) is strictly forbidden in CRL. TRUE FALSE

7. Collaboration among language and content teachers is desirable and tandem-teaching is unavoidable. TRUE FALSE

8. The most appropriate approach to Content-Rich teaching is task-based learning. TRUE FALSE

9. Can you name two tasks or task-types for a Content-Rich classroom which may suit your teaching context?

10. Can you write a question or a “but” about the Content-Rich approach to language learning?

Your score:
Your Team score:

KEY:

True: 1, 4, 5, 8
False: 2, 3, 6, 7