

## **Content-Based Learning for Lifelong Learners**

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Content-based instruction is often linked with terms such as bilingualism and language immersion which are themselves often linked with young learners. This, however, is not only for the young. Content-based instruction can be an effective way of teaching lifelong learners the target language they desire to learn.

### **What is content-based instruction?**

Content-based instruction is a form of language learning that allows learners to process and negotiate their target language through content (Lyster, 2007). The focus of the lesson becomes the content or subject matter, while the language instruction becomes more fully integrated into the lesson. Learners are given the chance to learn the target language through the content, thereby affording a more enriching language experience by witnessing how the language is used more naturally in the context of the subject matter.

One of the most difficult stumbling blocks of content-based instruction is finding the most acceptable balance in the amount of new cognitive and language information that is exposed to the learners. Finding this balance is especially important with young learners who may feel overwhelmed by dealing with a large amount of both at the same time (Lyster, 2007; Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). However, with lifelong learners, most of the difficulty can be placed on the language portion of the instruction since they already have enough life experience and knowledge to process the content. This can be done by creating more meaning-focused

lessons, thus allowing the students to process and negotiate the target language in a more natural context, hence making the shift from language learning to language using.

### **Who can learn through content-based instruction?**

Learning language through content can be effective for learners of all ages with either a high or low level of proficiency in their target language.

For low level learners, instructors are encouraged to provide support and scaffolding of the new language and content being taught. Repetition and rephrasing are also important ways for the learners to negotiate the meaning of, acquire, and begin using the new language (Lyster, 2007; Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010).

For both low and high level learners, integrated feedback should become a regular part of each lesson. Through corrective feedback from the teacher in the form of recasting, which can later be developed into self-repair by the learners themselves, the learners have a better chance of acquiring and using the target language (Lyster, 2007).

### **Why is content-based learning important?**

With regards to lifelong learning and content-based learning, the Commission of the European Communities' *Lifelong Learning in Europe* framework (as cited in Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010) lists communication in languages alongside math, science, technology and so forth. "This has clear implications for a more integrated language approach when first and other languages are conceptualized together as being complementary and contributory conduits for developing communication skills for lifelong learning."

## **Tips for integrating content-based instruction into the classroom**

When it comes to content-based instruction, the key is finding the best content for the units of study. The following are some suggestions for finding the right content for your learners, and the different kinds of activities in which to study this content while keeping language education in mind.

### *Playing off your strengths*

A vast majority of language instructors did not begin their careers in language education. Many instructors have undergraduate degrees or work experience in a large variety of topics and fields. This knowledge could easily be drawn upon to enhance language lessons. Devoting units of lessons to these specialities can provide the learners with interesting topics of discussion. For example, an instructor with an undergraduate degree in art history could focus a unit of lessons on great painting masters throughout history, thereby teaching the learners about these artists and their works along with providing the language necessary for describing and analysing works of art. This provides the learners with both information on the content as well as the language used in that field.

Additionally, a large number of language teachers are currently living and teaching in a country that is not their original home. An important aspect of language education is the close connection between language and culture. Often an understanding of the language's culture is necessary for fully understanding the language itself. "Studying through a different language is fundamental to fostering international understanding" (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). Therefore the content of some lessons can easily be focused upon the culture of the target language or instructor. Thus the learners are given both information about another culture, but also the

language used in cultural discussions which can then be used to describe their own culture to visitors from other countries.

### *Playing off their strengths*

One of the easiest ways to find the right content for your learners is to look to them for the subject matter of their lessons. Lifelong learners have a wealth of experience and knowledge, so this should be utilized to its fullest. They have a lifetime of travel and work experience, and hobbies and interests that can make the perfect starting point for lessons that appeal directly to them. A variety of activities can be used to give the learners a chance to share something about themselves while educating the others such as presentations by the students about their specific areas of expertise with an extensive question and answer portion, discussions, role-plays, storytelling, and debates.

### *Talking about the news*

Current events are an excellent source of real world content that can span across a large spectrum of topics and interests. They can also be the springboard for various discussions and debates. Using news articles or reports in the classroom allows for chances to improve reading, listening, speaking and writing skills .

News articles can be used in the classroom in a variety of different ways. One way is to assign one news article to half of the class and a different article to the other half. The website [breakingnewsenglish.com](http://breakingnewsenglish.com) provides news articles for English learners that have been graded for several different proficiency levels. For homework the students are required to read the article and answer an accompanying set of comprehension questions that are designed to draw attention

to the most important aspects of the article. In class, the students review the articles and questions with the others who shared the same article to check for understanding. Then students with different articles pair up and share the news with each by summarizing the contents. The next step would be for the students to choose their own articles or reports, and then share the information with the other learners in pairs or as mini-group presentations. Some news topics could also be used as the focus of in-class debates, thus improving the learners' ability to support arguments.

## **Conclusion**

By learning language through content, learners are provided with interesting and fulfilling lessons that are geared more towards their interests and allow them to use language in a more natural and realist manner. Utilizing the abundance of life experiences of lifelong learners in lessons can also be a rich and rewarding experience for both the learners and instructors alike.

## References

- Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and language integrated learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyster, R. (2007). *Learning and teaching languages through content: a counterbalanced approach*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub.