

# The Role of Content-based Approaches to Language Learning in the Post-methods Era

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## Background

It has now been over a decade since researchers in Applied Linguistics such as Richards (2001) declared an end to the Methods era in language instruction. In the post-methods era, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has come to provide the basis for most contemporary language teaching. The twentieth century saw the Direct Method as an improvement over Grammar Translation. By mid-century, the Audiolingual Method with claims based on the then most recent insights from the sciences of linguistics and psychology, gained prominence, yet, according to Richards, began to fade by the 1970s, especially in the United States where it was discredited and displaced by subsequent alternative methods such as The Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and Suggestopedia.

By the 1980s, in mainstream language teaching, a new approach, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) arose as the recommended basis for language instruction as the trend of great distances being closed by advances in transportation such as air travel was to make opportunities for face to face interaction between speakers of different languages more plentiful and hence put a greater premium on communicative competence for many of the advocates of this approach. In subsequent decades since that time Richards claims CLT has continued to be considered “the most plausible basis for language teaching”. Nevertheless, CLT has come to be understood to mean “little more than a general set of principles” that teachers or educational institutions might apply or interpret in a variety of ways.

Perhaps this resilient characteristic of approaches as opposed to methods, and of CLT as an approach in particular with principles of such a general nature which allow for various applications and interpretations, help to explain why it has maintained such a strong hold over mainstream teaching practice for so long a time. Social scientists like Fukuyama (2011) have found that all kinds of institutions tend to be conservative and resist change and although his work focuses mainly on political institutions in government, educational institutions are also social institutions and do not seem exempt from his findings. These findings show that with social institutions, stake holders often have a vested interest in preserving the status quo. Even when the logic or benefit of newly introduced practices can be understood, older practices,

especially when attempts at change derive from external sources not originating from the local culture or community to which the particular institution belongs, will find difficulty in displacing old with new. One reason is that institutions if they are to be reliable and run smoothly, are by their very nature conservative and averse to the kind of risk that change can bring with it.

Therefore, even in what has been declared a Post-Methods era, a period in which CLT has gained such a prominent consensus among language teachers, a strong reliance on certain methods continues to persist in some regions around the globe. In Asia, for example, where learners in China are often not accustomed to taking initiative or offering up their opinions in a public forum like the classroom, the need to bridge the old and the new has prompted researchers like Kong (2011) to propose a comprehensive approach or fusion of the Grammar Translation Method and CLT as counterintuitive as this might at first seem to a western observer.

In Japan, even as a movement to improve oral communication skills by increasing instruction and classroom time spent on English conversation, educational institutions such as Aoyama Gakuin High School in Tokyo have selected an audiolingual text book, *Side by Side* (Molinsky and Bliss, 2000) whose teacher's guide (Molinsky and Bliss, 2007) while updated with a sparse offering of communicative and other tasks, such as information gaps and jigsaw tasks, is organized according to a grammar based syllabus and essentially recommends audiolingual practice of orally repeating along with a CD and practicing the prescribed grammar structures for each unit with a partner in pair work. In a setting where spontaneously offering opinions, and discussion or debate do not come about naturally, it may not be so unreasonable a solution to fall back on old but familiar methods like this. As the student progresses to the later units in this text book, longer sections of discourse appear as reading sections that do help to incorporate a minor strand of what begins to resemble content-based teaching into the syllabus. Content-Based Teaching (CBT), which is one of the widest used of the various communicative approaches, will be discussed in the remainder of this paper.

### **The Need for Comprehensible Input**

One of the primary reasons for choosing CBI has to do with the students' need for comprehensible input. Krashen (1985) has written about understanding messages or comprehensible input being sufficient for acquiring a language. Accordingly, acquisition could take place provided certain conditions such as adequate exposure to the language and interesting material were present, both of which films and reading excerpts from or entire film scripts whose further use more extensively, outside of class, are encouraged, can offer. Additionally, as required by Krashen, an important criteria of relaxed atmosphere can also be met in a course which involves viewing

and discussing stories, articles, books or videos the students are interested in and enjoy.

However, I should mention here that I believe Krashen had been writing of his ideas about second language acquisition mainly from an ESL perspective. In an EFL context, such as in Japan, I find the need to modify his hypothesis, as it has been my experience that many of the students I teach have almost no access to English speakers outside of class whom they might engage in conversation. In the absence of such access, no amount of communicative competence will enable them to draw out the necessary level of input (as in Krashen's model) from others such as can be done with native or highly skilled speakers of English who, for example, in Krashen's California, are more likely to be able to provide recent immigrant learners from Mexico with sufficient quantities of input.

Using content as a basis for language instruction such as films for this language learning can help compensate for at least some of the lack of comprehensible input available in this EFL environment. To the degree that certain films can in some ways simulate real life contexts in the English-speaking locales where they are set (outside of any classroom), using films (and more recently podcasts) may be among the more effective ways EFL teachers can provide their students with rich and authentic input.

### **Learning Vocabulary from Context**

Content-based approaches can also provide abundant opportunities for learning vocabulary from context. For example, in a study using a long text (a graded reader) and two types of vocabulary tests, Horst, Cobb and Meara (1998) found that about one out of five of the unknown words were learned by students to some degree. In terms of actual words this averaged about five words. It should be mentioned, however, that among similar studies, the higher gains in the Horst, Cobb and Meara study were in part due to the effect of the length of the text, but additionally to the use of a simplified reader in which the unknown words do not occur too densely as well as the conceptual knowledge that learners bring with them from their first language.

Conceptual knowledge can be a critical factor for teachers when assessing various content candidates for material to use in a CBI course with the aim of offering opportunities for learning vocabulary from context. Nagy, Anderson and Herman (1987), for instance, found that a major factor influencing learning from context was whether the word represented an unfamiliar concept. Additionally, Shefelbine (1990) similarly found learners experienced great difficulty with new concepts. In his study, however, the likelihood of learning vocabulary from natural contexts was greater than in other studies since there was a deliberate focus on having learners guess the

meanings of unknown vocabulary.

As a long-term goal, and considering the amount of language exposure that would be necessary given the rates of incidental learning mentioned above to learn a significant amount of vocabulary, one of the most important things a teacher can do is to try to encourage students to take up their own lifelong CBI programs by exploring content which is of special interest to them in order to continue their language development long after they have graduated and left their language classrooms behind. Sometimes a good way to do this is to introduce a certain author to a class and if the students like the author they may go on to read several of his books. For Japan a good example of this might be a novel like *Never Let Me Go* (Ishiguro, 2008). The novel is about issues surrounding human cloning and so lends itself to thought and discussion about social issues today's young people may indeed be faced with one day. A film was released in 2010 based on the novel and students could both read the novel and see the film.

### **Further Benefits of CBI**

By its very nature, CBI offers a dual set of benefits. One comes from the aspects related to language learning. Another comes from the very content itself.

According to Wallace (1968) what we indeed today might well refer to as content-based learning and a good deal of it in an EFL-like setting appears to have played a significant role in the development and career of the great Dutch artist, Rembrandt. His parents sent him to the Latin School in Leiden whose purpose in those days was to prepare young men for admission to the University of Leiden to prepare him for a learned profession. This university in Rembrandt's time, Wallace tells us, was the equal of any in Europe. Although by 1620 Rembrandt would eventually leave this course of study (having matriculated but never to have attended the university) turning instead to a career in art, as we shall see, the several years he spent during this preparation in learning a foreign language, Latin, and undertaking content-based course work there left a significant and long-lasting mark on him and his art that was to come.

Furthermore, and this underlines the important continuity with which content-based study can sometimes provide learners, there is also evidence to suggest that even prior his attending the Latin School reading and exposure to language in the form of written and spoken content from books seemed to have played a formative role in the artists early home life. For among Rembrandt's drawings there is one which depicts a the candlelit scene of a small family, very likely his own (his mother known to have been a devout reader), seated around a book on a table.

At the Latin School, which Rembrandt attended from the age of 7 to 14, a heavy emphasis was placed on religious studies. The school's curriculum included the

reading of Cicero, Terence, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Caesar, Sallust, Livy and Aesop. Students there conversed with each other in Latin, and Rembrandt even went so far as to become accustomed, so Wallace tells us, to the Latin form of his own name, Rembrantus Harmensis Leydensis (Rembrandt the son of Harmen of Leiden). It was for this reason that his early works are signed by the budding artist with the monogram, RHL. Wallace reports that Rembrandt not only passed his courses, but later “recalled [them] in detail; his historical and mythological paintings reflect meticulous attention to the texts on which they were based.”

Wallace gives due credit to painters who indirectly influenced him like Caravaggio or more directly so like Pieter Lastman who inspired Rembrandt to become a history (this also included the “Biblical past”) painter--at a time when history painting was not notably fashionable among the Dutch. However, the role played by his meaningful content-based learning during those formative years at the Latin School and how this would later influence his choice of subject matter and the detail with which he depicted it is also hard to deny.

The degree to which the artist made this commitment to a devotion to the historical has been summed up by Wallace with these words: “Rembrandt not only chose to take up history painting but dedicated himself to it with a fervor that lasted all his life.”

To close this section of my discussion, I will describe a more contemporary illustration of this point. I heard recently from a colleague who was teaching a film studies class. He showed me an extensive report that one of his students had written. It was her graduation thesis and the topic concerned one of the films he had showed in class, *Dead Man Walking*, a film about a convict on death row and his lawyer. He told me that she had previously not known what she wanted to do with her life after she graduated but that in seeing this film and writing about it she had made up her mind to go to law school; that is what a liberal arts program is for.

## Conclusion

In the post-methods era, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has come to provide the basis for most contemporary language teaching. Content-Based Teaching (CBT), one of the widest used of the various communicative approaches, can provide both motivation and the comprehensive input required in language acquisition as well as opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning. It can also provide additional benefits either greatly influencing the future careers of students or even helping them to choose the directions of their own future development.

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— Abstract —

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Learning in the Post-methods Era

It has now been over a decade since researchers in Applied Linguistics such as Richards declared an end to the Methods era in language instruction. In the post-methods era, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has come to provide the basis for most contemporary language teaching. Content-Based Teaching (CBT), one of the widest used of the various communicative approaches, is discussed in this paper.

メソッド後の時代における内容重視型言語

リチャーズのような応用言語学者が言語教育におけるメソッドの時代が終焉を迎えたと宣言してから10年以上になる。メソッド後の時代では、コミュニカティヴ・ランゲージ・ティーチング (CLT) は、最新の言語教育の基盤を提供してきている。この論文では、多様な形態をとるコミュニカティヴ・アプローチの中で最も広く使われている指導方法のひとつである、内容重視型指導法 (CBT) について論じる。