Content-Based Instruction/ Learning: A Rewarding Investment in the Interrelated Triangle of Language, Literature and Culture

Asst. Prof. Inam Najim Jaber
nj.jasim@gmail.com
College of Education for Women/ Department of English/ University of Baghdad (now retired)

Key Words: content-based instruction, language, literature
الكلمات المفتاحية : التدريس الذي يقوم على اساس المحتوى، اللغة

Abstract:
The study aims to explain how essential is content-based instruction in teaching-learning English as a foreign language. Supported by examples from local and non local actual learning environment, the researcher argues that content-based instruction can be vitally effective in teaching-learning English.

The content-based instruction theory adopted in English language teaching (ELT) class looks at language as a living entity, not mere words, as a reservoir of man's experiences, history and values represented aesthetically in literature.

This is the premise on which the content-based instruction rests. The environment of (ELT) invites the learners not to wrestling with grammatical rules in isolation of contextualized situations. Rather, it introduces them with authentic material – language as it is actually used. The content (text + context) can ensure a

pleasurable interaction between the learner and the target language.

Examples of integrating literature were presented by the researcher as good media for (ELT) in her Translation Class. The end result was surprising: an environment that ensured enjoyment, motivation and critical thinking not to mention a good intercultural interaction between the source language (Arabic) and the target language (English), a factor necessary to assimilate English as a foreign language.

تدريس اللغة وتعلمها الذي يقوم على المحتوى : استثمار مفيد في مثلث اللغة
والأدب والثقافة المترابطة فيما بينها

أستاذ مساعد انعام نجم جابر
كلية التربية للبنات/ قسم اللغة الأنجليزية/ جامعة بغداد (متقاعدة)

المستخلص

يهدف البحث الي ان يبين مدى اهمية تدريس اللغة الأنجليزية وتعلمها بصفتها لغة اجنبية بالأستناد على المحتوى بدل القواعد المجردة من واقع اللغة وسياقاتها. وذلك من خلال اعتماد الباحثة على امثلة من واقع البيئة التعليمية المحلية وغير المحلية ولا سيما الأمثلة التي اوردتها في سياق تجربتها في تدريس اكثر من مادة من مواد اللغة الأنجليزية التي درستها في مختلف المراحل الدراسية في قسم اللغة الأنجليزية. وقد وجدت ان الطريقة التي تعتمد المحتوى في تدريس اللغة الأنجليزية وتعلمها هي ذات تأثير حيوي لأنها تنظر الى اللغة على انها كائن حي وليس مجرد كلمات ، بل مستودعا لتجارب الأنسان وتأريخه وقيمه والمتمثلة جماليا في اللغة.

وهذه هي النظرية التي تقوم عليها طريقة تدريس اللغة الأنجليزية وتعلمها والتي تقوم على المحتوى. وهنا لا تعمد البيئة التعليمية الى ان تجعل المتعلم يصارع قواعد اللغة بمعزل عن سياقات المواقف التي استعملت في اللغة ، بل تدعوه الى التعامل معها كما تستعمل في الواقع الفعلي في الحياة اليومية وهذا يعني توفر المحتوى الذي يتكون من النص والسياق الذي استعمل فيه ، محتوئ يمكن ان يضمن للمتعلم تفاعلا معمقا مع اللغة المراد تعلمها.

واستناداً الى تجربة الباحثة الفعلية في تدريس مادة الترجمة قدمت امثلة لأستخدام النصوص الأدبية بصفتها وسائط جيدة في تدريس اللغة الأنجليزية بصفتها لغة اجنبية.

وكانت المحصلة مذهلة اذ توفرت بيئة ضمنت المتعة والدافعية والقدرة على التفكير والتحليل، ناهيك عن وجود تفاعل بين ثقافة اللغة المصدر (العربية) واللغة المترجم اليها (الأنجليزية) وهو عامل مهم في فهم اللغة الأجنبية.

Introduction:

The inter-relationship between language, literature and culture should be quite helpful for foreign language learners and teachers. This is because any literature and any culture can be contained only in language.

> "Language is a receptacle and transmitter of habits, traditions, routines, social and economic context among many other things and when mastered via literature or poetry it can reflect the human soul. Literature and culture in English language teaching at an undergraduate level can be seen as the bridge between the target language and its soul…" (Cruz: 2010).

Obviously, then language can be described as the reservoir of a nation's literature and culture. The integration of literature and culture in the (ELT) class can be a successful solution to the insoluble problems encountered by learners who are required to attain an academic, professional level in English. This is mainly because the content-based instruction (CBI) ensures an environment which can secure enjoyment, motivation and critical thinking not to mention a good inter-cultural interaction between the source language and the target language, a factor necessary to assimilate the target language.

Opposite to the traditional methods of teaching English language, which is based on teaching English in isolation of context, the content-based method provides a channel where literature and culture (contents) necessitates communication and stimulates linguistic cognition by the learner. Not only this; the content-based learning approach deals with the four skills of English learning as interrelated to one another. Such an approach should develop in the learner a capability to understand the meaning of

an English text without a need to translate, which will certainly block a natural assimilating of the meaning. Unfortunately, this is what most of the undergraduate students of English as a foreign language in Iraq do when embarking on dealing with most of texts almost in all subjects. The first thing they do is they go translating. Unfortunately, translation intersects with natural communicative of meaning as students turn to machine translation which is mostly notorious for illogical results. This can, to a large extent, also be true about any institution involved in teaching English which does not adopt a content-based learning approach.

The limits of the study
Over more than a decade the researcher tried the content-based instruction in her English as a foreign language (EFL) classes in more than one topic (Translation, reading comprehension, composition, essay writing and advanced conversation). In this paper she supported her argument about the advantages of content-based instruction with reference to her actual experience in teaching Translation.

The significance of the study
The study is meant to help encourage the adoption of the content-based instruction in teaching English as a foreign language. Based on the researcher's actual experience in teaching, the study explains its advantages over the traditional methods and how rewarding it can be by integrating literature and culture (contents) in the EFL class.

The triangle of language, literature and culture
The natural relationship between language, literature and culture has allowed for an ideal space for the theory of content-based learning /instruction of English as a foreign language (EFL) and

as a second (ESL) in general and for sustained content-based instructions (CBI) in particular where students are required to develop a certain academic or professional English (Pally:2000).

Students of (EFL) or (ESL) are required to develop the four skills of English: Listening, reading, speaking and writing. From her experience in teaching she has noticed that although teachers generally make good efforts so that their students can master the skills, the students remain inapt and fall short of acquiring the academic level in English.

For their parts, the students are generally observed to have made good efforts. Still, they feel they are a long distance from attaining the academic or professional level. They can score high marks in exams, but when it comes to efficient use of the language, they do not feel confident enough as they fall short of conditions required.

So what is the problem? Where does it go wrong? One can argue that the problem lies, mainly in the approach adopted in teaching where the four skills of English are taught as separate entities with borders set between them. It is an approach which can be described as artificial with no regard to the content which has a certain context or situation which is the main nerve of communication.

The content-based instruction (CBI) has been the main concern of language and Literature Departments in universities for years now. In her article, 'Sustaining Interest/ Advancing Learning' Marcia Pall, New York University and Fordham University (2000) provided an overview of (CBI) over the last 20 years. She said:

> Recent studies suggest that a gap exists between the skills students need and those taught (and learned) in ESL/EFL classes. I suggest a reason for this gap and suppose that it might be filled by sustained content-based instruction, support for

which comes from research in second-language acquisition, text analysis and genre analysis" (ibid.).

Content-based instruction (CBI)

Instead of using language as a tool, the content-based instruction deals with language as a living organ which may occur in different situations. Instead of rigid rules about the language, learners of (EFL) learn how the language functions, how it is actually used through contents which could be for instance any literary genre (prose or poetry), a movie, a video, media context…etc. "A variety of materials can be used to engage learners in English language content instruction." (Hernandez: 2003).

So contents can provide EFL/ESL students with a realistic environment – a real discourse community where English skills can be developed "beyond the language acquisition level", as Shanahan put it (1997:165).

The Rationale behind Integrating literature and Culture in EFL/ESL Classes

The argument about the significance of culture in ELT classes branches into two directions. One goes for integrating the target-language culture, while the other goes for integrating the source-language culture.

 In spite of the two opposing directions, culture remains indispensible in language learning. Quoting Adaskou et al., Sardi (2002:101) previewed three definitions of culture for the purposes of (ELT): One refers to culture in the aesthetic sense which involves literatures, music, films and the fine arts. The other definition is given in the sociological sense which helps in understanding the structure of the institutions in the target language from national health to family in addition to varieties of the language used in different situations relying on the level of

interpersonal relationship. The third definition of culture is in the pragmatic sense which refers to the social skills which help communication according to setting, audience, purpose and genre. However, according to Sardi both the directions support the inclusion of cultural elements in the English language course. What they differ about is "which culture or cultures should receive focus and how this should be done" (ibid).

Culture, being an interdisciplinary core offers several perspectives that (ELT) can also approach such as artistic discourses, social conventions and reflexive impacts. And the debate on the inclusion or no inclusion of Culture in (ELT) class is long past. Now the matter is of method (Cruz, 2010:2).

Especially supportive of the inclusion of culture in (ELT) is professor Henning (1993). Quoted by Shanahan (1997:164-174) Henning believes that, culture must be woven into the curriculum and that literature is one feature among many in the cultural domain that provides what one might call 'added value' beyond the level of language acquisition (ibid. 165)

The 'affective Magnet'
Language has deep roots in human experience (represented by culture and literature), says Shanahan. Thus, a state of interrelatedness has developed between the two, which has helped to provide the 'affective magnet' in the process of language learning, a product which has rendered the integration of culture and literature in (ELT) as inducement rather than obstacle (ibid.169).

Content-based instruction and TESOL
In its 45th annual convention held in New Orleans in Louisiana, USA in 2011, TESOL gave good weight to content-based instruction. To start off with all the abstracts of papers and

workshops which took part in the convention were classified primarily not subject -wise but content-area wise. And the number of contributions under content-based instruction were about 55.

Earlier in 2006 TESOL has published a volume in the Case Studies in TESOL Practice Series under the title Literature in Language Teaching. Reviewed by Karim Sadighi, "the series is intended to provide practical examples of matters related to teaching and learning English in second and foreign language context"

In his review Sadighi says a number of teachers from different countries describe their experiences of integrating literature and language in their (EFL) classes. Ian Butler describes his experience in North West University (first year) in South Africa. It sounds an exciting one. The teacher here divides his English course into four components: The first one (Introduction to English Studies) is meant to develop language awareness; the second (Introduction to Textual Analysis) is meant to give the students an idea about language styles; the third is meant to give an idea about literary genres which provide authentic material for language analysis, which is also a medium for grammar awareness. Literature is used in all the four-component experience (ibid. 147).

Short stories were used by another teacher, Natalia Hess in the context of Arizona University. She believes that teaching short stories involves all four language skills, developing opinions, reflections and language activity. More language-related analysis could be added to make literature a genuine means for acquiring enjoyable language, Sadighi added.

Learning English through a literary text (content) would lead to language and cultural enrichment, argues Cruz (2010:7). A literary text would provide the learner with a context that makes him/her 1)familiar with the syntactic structure of the text , which

differs from a spoken one, 2) remember words better,,3) improve writing and speech, he added. And the cultural enrichment would be possible when looking up meaning of words which by the by would necessitate the cultural backgrounds and the origins of them (ibid.4).

The pedagogical potentials of literature in teaching English as a foreign or second language is highly valued by Lawal (educator and researcher from the University of Ilorin in Nigeria. He is quite supportive of Afolayan (1972), "It is unthinkable that a second language should be taught alone in the pure state as it were. Language is a scheme, a mould whose substance is either literature or civilization".

He believes that Literature provides a medium where the four skills of (EFL) can be taught/ learnt, "Literary materials stimulate the learning of words and expressions and mechanics of grammar in meaningful, realistic and memorable contexts…"

Reading the literary text is expected to improve listening and speaking whereas commenting, analyzing and summarizing should help develop writing.

Contents as media for teaching (EFL)
1. The use of poetry

The researcher used the following poem (written by her in Arabic and translated into English by her)) as a realistic medium to help solve the grammatical problem of the conditional clauses in English particularly the third conditional in the Translation class. Being a persistent problem for my students in the course of Translation in the final year before graduating, I always tried to refresh their minds about the grammatical rules of If clauses in English. They seem to have understood the rule, but when it comes to transferring meaning from Arabic (the source language) into English (the target language) within a certain text, they got stuck. Therefore, I started thinking of integrating literary texts in

my class, . *But for you* (an excerpt) provided the medium of poetry:

But for you
But for you,
The orange trees <u>would have not blossomed</u> this spring,
They <u>would have stayed</u> shrouded with fears
From the creeping black clouds.
And even if they had blossomed,
The fruits <u>would have been</u> not orange,
But black balls picked but by the wicked,
With which they <u>would</u> hit our white dreams.
But for you,
The spring <u>would have not come</u>,
And the winter <u>would have continued</u> dark,
With the sun shivering and the moon shuddering.
But for you,
The gentle breeze of March <u>would have not blown</u>,
It <u>would have stayed driven</u> by storms,
Whose dreams have always been to block the tender breeze.
But for you,

We <u>could not have seen</u> the flowers courageous,
Opening freely choosing their colours as they wish,
The flowers that learned how to be courageous only from you.
But for you,
There <u>would have been no</u> pens in our hands,
No students in class,
No classroom for students to dream of a more beautiful tomorrow.
But for you,
There <u>would have been no</u> cup of tea in our hands,
And no songs of the afternoon.

But for you,
Poetry and poets <u>would have been</u> silent.

The underlined in the above poem mark conditional 2 and conditional 3. What happened was I provided them with a realistic context, not artificial grammatical rule isolated from reality. And the repetition of the conditional three in the poem provided a unique chance for them to know when and how to use that conditional.

This single poem can in the meanwhile be a good content for teaching students the segmental and the supra-segmental of English through reading poem by the teacher first then by them. The skills of listening and writing (through analyzing commenting on the poem) can also be promoted by the same content.

Haynes (2000) goes very much for using content in teaching and learning English as a foreign language, a second language, and for native speakers for junior or university students. By using the novel The Old Man and the Sea by Earnest Hemingway – described by him as corpus, Haynes suggested to teach language through "analyzing real language use and discovering the forms, functions and organization of the language from this analysis". His argument is that a language cannot be learnt without a context. Grammar cannot be learnt as rules standing on their own, "Unless you have a corpus, you don't have language" (ibid.6).
Quoting Sinclair, (1991: 5-6), Haynes said, "Any instance of language depends on its surrounding context".

2. **The use of novels**

The novel of *The Old Man and the Sea* was used by Haynes to help students identify the phrase structure, the clause structure and the devices used to achieve cohesion (ibid. 37)

Besides, reading the novel should help learners do more than one job at the same time. They can learn the meaning of vocabulary; identify phrases and idioms and trace the cohering devices. The later is highly important as it would help with writing a coherent piece of writing.

Also the text of the novel (described by Haynes as a sustained text as opposed to disconnected text) will provide a suitable medium for doing some deconstruction of complex clause structures.

Having adopted myself the part of deconstructing complex structures in dealing with texts in the translation course for the fourth year, the year before graduation, a head of embarking on transferring meaning from the source language text (SLT) into the target language text (TLT), I found out it was quite helpful for students in understanding the text. Of course they are involved in doing similar exercises in the advanced grammar course, but in the absence of a sustained text or content, which makes all the difference.

3. **The use of short stories**

Another example of using a literary text in teaching/learning English is by multimedia-English.com. A video is presented about a short story entitled The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstien. The children's short story *The Giving Tree* presents a content which can be integrated in English language teaching class especially when it comes to some grammatical aspects which tend to be problematic for non-native speakers such as the use of the modal verb 'would', the use of some phrasal verbs, the use of some adverbs like 'hardly 'and the participle .

In the meanwhile this literary text may be a good answer for opponents of integrating literature into EFL class. They argue that literary texts are difficult for students to understand in the first place. It's important to choose a literary text which suits the needs of (EFL) learners at the beginners or advanced stage.

The Giving Tree (an excerpt), by Shel Silverstein

Once there was a tree... And she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and leap from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide and go seek. And when he was tired, he would sleep in her shade.
…
–"I'm sorry", said the tree, "I wish I could give you something... but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump."
….
This story can be recommended for beginner learners of English. Being a realistic material, the story provided a content which can serve as authentic to learn a number of grammatical and structural formations most of which are problematic for learners of English as a foreign language. The underlined in the above story mark some problematic features in English grammar for a foreign learner such as the use of the modal *would* in the narrative text, which is different from the second conditional *would* and the unreal past after the verb *wish*:

Translation as content in (EFL) Instruction:
Translation has proved to be an ideal content which can be quite helpful in (EFL) class. Such a conclusion is based on the very nature of translation,

Translation is not only a linguistic act; it is also a cultural act, an act of communication across cultures. Translating always involves both language and culture simply because the two

cannot really be separated. Language is culturally embedded: it both expresses and shapes cultural reality. (House, 2009: 11)

Quoting Lotman, Bassnett wrote, "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language."(1980:14).
The intermesh of language, culture and reality allows translation, being a communicative act, to be effective in learning English as a foreign or a second language.
Quoting Duff (1989), Popovic says,

> The studies that have tackled commonly made criticism …have also shown that if properly designed, translation activities can be employed to enhance the four skills and develop accuracy, clarity and flexibility.

The question of how to integrate translation in (EFL) class can very well be connected to the problems and difficulties the foreign learner may have, which can be diagnosed by the teacher.

Talking about my own experience of using translation as an effective tool in (EFL) class, I can say that it helped students to enhance their English. Through practices of deconstructing and reconstructing certain structural formations such as compound adjectives and certain stretches in certain texts, they improved their understanding and writing. Without understanding the structures of the texts, the students will not be able to move between the two languages, the source and target language. The other translation activity was to think of connectivity between sentences and paragraphs. Otherwise they will produce incoherent pieces of translation.

One other main translation activity is how to solve the lexical problems since not every part of speech in the source Language can be rendered equally the same in the target language.

Quoting Schaffiner, Dagiliene (2012) said that using translation can be useful for foreign language learning as it can in the main develop their style and improve the learners' understanding of how languages work.
"Translation in foreign language classes enhances better understanding of structures of the two languages…" Dagiliene asserted (ibid. 128).

I fully agree with Dagiliene . Through contrasts and comparisons when moving between the two different structures of the two languages so that they can transfer the meaning, learners develop their cognitive skills.

Conclusions
The content-based instruction provides two very essential components in the process of learning English as a foreign language; it provides authentic and real materials. And it can be useful in a number of methods:

1. It can help learners develop critical thinking capability. Through sustained texts as authentic materials teachers can create a student-centered environment. In such an interactive environment the students are involved in reading, explaining, commenting, analyzing and summarizing of the text all at the same time. In the end there will be no need to translate on the part of the student so that s/he may gather the meaning, argues Hernandez (2003).

2. Through content-base instruction students "learn not only English grammar but also analytical skills that are key to learning in any field" (Haynes, 2002:53).

3. It provides a learning environment where students are exposed to register in English. Through texts situated in certain contexts, students can be exposed to more than one level of formality in English. Generally, spoken English differs from written English.

4. English is a highly idiomatic language. It can be argued that Idioms of different categories can be ideally understood through texts within a context; not in isolation of them. The website (www.phrases.org) provides ideal contents that can be used to help students know the meaning of idioms and what's more important how to use them, not to mention the culture that produced them.

5. Stimulation and motivation are the two basic requirements of successful (EFL) class. Students of (EFL) can be stimulated and motivated through content-based instructions.

Bibliography
- Adaskou et al. (1990). 'Design Decisions on the Cultural Content of a Secondary English Course for Morocco'. in Sardi Csilla (2002). 'On the Relationship between Culture and ELT'. Kalbu Studijos, No 3. (www.kalbos.lt/Zurnalia)
- Afolayan, A. (1972). 'The Relevance of Language Study for the Teaching and Learning of English Literature in Nigeria' in Lawal, Adebayo . 'Values and Limitations of Using Literary Text for Teaching ESL' (www.unilorin.edu.ng/journals/education.
- Bassnett, Susan (1980) *Translation Studies*. London and New York: Methuen.

- Cruz, Jose (2010). 'The Role of Literature and Culture in English Language Teaching', Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana / Relinguistica, No. 7 (www.relinguistica.azc.uam.mx/no 007).
- Duff, A. (1989). *Translation* in Popovic, R. 'The place of Translation in Language Teaching' (www.sueleather associates.com).
- Haynes, Charles (2000). 'The Old Man and the Sea: A data-Driven, Corpus-Based Grammar-Reading Course', in Marcia Pally (ed.) (2000), *Sustained Content Teaching in Academic ESL/EFL*, USA: Houghton Mifflin
- Hernandez, Ana (2003). 'Making Content Instruction Accessible for English language Learners' in English Learners: Reaching the highest Level of English Literacy, International Reading Association. (www.Learners.org/workshops).
- House, Julian. (2013) . *Translatation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pally, Marcia (ed.) (2000) 'Sustaining Interest/Advancing Learning' in *Sustained Content Teaching in Academic ESL/EFL*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin
- Paran, Amos (ed.) (2006). 'Literature in Language Teaching and Learning, Virginia: TESOL, Reviewed by Karim Sadighi, University of Urmia, Iran.
- Popovic, R. (-----). 'Translation in language Teaching' Sue Leather Associates (www.sueleatherassociates.com.
- Schaffiner, C. (1998) . *Qualifications for Professional Translators. Translation in Language Teaching Versus Teaching Translation.* St. Jerome publishing in Dagiliene, Inga. (2012). 'Translation as a Learning Method in English Language Teaching' Kalbu Studijos, N0 21 . (www.kalbos.lt/Zurnalia).

- Shanahan, Daniel (1997). 'Articulating the Relationship between Language, Literature and Culture: Towards a New Agenda for Foreign Language Teaching and Research', The Modern Language Journal (MLJ), Vo. 81.2 pp. 164-1174 (www.Jstor.org).