CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION: RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS

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Annotation: Content-based instruction has been used in a variety of language learning contexts for the last twenty-five years, though its popularity and wider applicability have increased dramatically in the past ten years. Early versions of content-based instruction (CBI) were used in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs, second language immersion programs for K-12 students, early foreign language magnet classrooms, and a variety of second language (L2) vocational and workplace instructional contexts.

Keywords: CBI, EAP, ESP, education, method, learning.

INTRODUCTION

A number of instructional approaches have been shown to be effective in classroom training research and are commonly incorporated into CBI approaches. When these approaches are incorporated, their demonstrated effectiveness provides additional support for CBI. In particular, research on cooperative learning, metacognitive/learning strategy instruction, and extensive reading are supported by impressive results and are readily incorporated within CBI.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cooperative learning requires that students work together (typically in small groups of four to six) to learn information and carry out a range of tasks. The purpose is to promote peer group support and peer instruction (cf. Vygotskian learning theory). There are a number of approaches to cooperative learning, though the approaches developed by Slavin and his colleagues have the strongest research documentation, with well over 100 controlled experimental research studies.

Slavin's research, in particular, has demonstrated strong improvements in student learning when students work in groups that have structured objectives, have group goals and rewards, promote individualized accountability, and provide each student in the group with equal opportunities for success. In two versions of his approach to cooperative learning, STAD and CIRC (Student Teams-Achievement Divisions, and Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition), results of classroom training studies consistently demonstrate significant gains for students in cooperative learning classes across a range of student groups and grade levels. In the case of STAD, this cooperative learning approach has demonstrated significant gains over control groups in language arts, math, reading comprehension, geography, history, and ESL.

Cooperative learning leads to greater student cooperation, higher motivation for learning, more positive student attributions for learning success, better attitudes toward school and learning, and greater self-esteem. Cooperative learning is consistent with the goals of CBI and is readily incorporated into CBI.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Depth-of-processing research argues that the presentation of coherent and meaningful information leads to, deeper processing, and that deeper informational processing results in better learning. Numerous features of this research can be directly associated with effective CBI.

First, research reported by Anderson shows that information which is more elaborated is memorized and recalled better. Research has demonstrated that students' self-generated elaborations (e.g., adding additional phrases to a sentence, continuing a sentence, or forming a "why" question about a sentence) lead to better recall of factual knowledge. Second, when information is closely related to other information in a text, student recall improves. For this reason, techniques for revealing connections between ideas in texts (e.g., graphic organizers) lead to better informational recall. Similarly, emotional and affective connections increase memory and recall of information. Third, the spaced study of information, rather than a single massive dose, leads to better memory and recall. Spaced study—the recycling of important related information and the efforts made by students to recall and connect prior information— generates multiple access paths in memory and greater connections to other information. The resulting more complex linkages and pathways lead to better learning and recall.

Overall, these depth-of-processing research findings are consistent with CBI, an approach that, by definition, promotes extended study of, coherent content and relevant language learning activities. Thus, depth-of-processing research provides support for the integration of language and content instruction.

Motivation, positive attributions, and interest are critical factors which support student success with challenging informational activities and which help them learn complex skills-two important goals of CBI Research has found that motivation and interest arise in part from the recognition that learning is indeed occurring and that the learning of sophisticated and challenging information justifies the effort. Further, considerable research argues that students who are more motivated, who develop an interest in curricular learning goals and activities, and who perceive themselves as successful and capable students learn more and do better in school. In addition, students with high interest and motivation make greater elaborations with learning material, make more connections among topical information, and can recall information better. Thus, motivation and interest also provide an explanation for the relationships between better learning and the depth-of-processing and discourse-processing research discussed above.

In similar respects, interest in content information, and the successes students attribute to content learning (based on past experiences), can lead to powerful intrinsic motivation. As noted by Krapp, Hidi, and Renninger, "situational interest, triggered by environmental factors, may evoke or contribute to the development of long-lasting individual interests" (p. 18). Thus, interest in the content of a course may trigger intrinsic motivation and lead to better learning. One goal of CBI is to generate interest in content information through stimulating material resources and instruction, leading students to develop intrinsic motivation to learn.

CONCLUSION

In a content-based approach, the activities of the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught, and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language. Such an approach lends itself quite naturally to the integrated teaching of the four traditional language skills. For example, it employs authentic reading materials which require students not only to understand information but to interpret and evaluate it as well. It provides a forum in which students can respond orally to reading and lecture materials. It recognizes that academic writing follows from listening, and reading, and thus requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing. In this approach, students are exposed to study skills and learn a variety of language skills which prepare them for the range of academic tasks they will encounter.

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