



Challenges in Implementing Content-based Language Pedagogy for Chinese Learners of English

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Abstract: As globalization accelerates and English solidifies its role as a global lingua franca, Content-Based Language Pedagogy (CBLP) has become widely adopted in English education for Chinese learners. Despite its promise to enhance both language proficiency and subject knowledge, the implementation of CBLP faces several challenges. This paper investigates the obstacles encountered when applying CBLP in China, encompassing issues related to teachers' professional expertise, the adaptability of textbooks, classroom management, students' motivation, and cultural differences. Solutions to these challenges are proposed, such as improving teacher training, developing diverse teaching materials, and modifying classroom activities, with the aim of enhancing the practical application of CBLP and offering theoretical and practical guidance for English teaching reforms in China.

Keywords: English learning, teaching challenges, language proficiency, subject knowledge, teacher training

1. Introduction

In recent years, Content-Based Language Pedagogy (CBLP) has emerged as a prominent approach in language teaching, particularly for English learners in non-English-speaking countries. This approach integrates language learning with subject matter instruction, allowing students to acquire both linguistic and academic knowledge simultaneously. For Chinese learners of English, CBLP offers a promising solution to address the dual challenge of improving language proficiency while deepening subject knowledge in disciplines such as science, history, and economics. The increasing demand for English proficiency in global communication, business, and academia has placed a significant emphasis on effective English teaching methods in China. Traditional language teaching models, which often separate language skills from content, have faced limitations in engaging students and fostering practical language use. CBLP, by contrast, encourages a more holistic learning experience, where students are exposed to real-world topics and contexts, promoting both cognitive development and language acquisition.

However, the successful implementation of CBLP in China faces several significant challenges. Teachers, often trained in traditional language teaching methods, may struggle to adapt to the dual demands of teaching both language and content. Moreover, existing textbooks and materials may not be sufficiently tailored to the needs of CBLP, and classroom management can become more complex when students are required to engage with unfamiliar subject matter in a foreign language. Cultural factors and students' varying levels of motivation also play a role in shaping the effectiveness of CBLP. This paper explores these challenges in detail, offering insights into how they can be addressed to enhance the practical application of CBLP in Chinese English language education. By identifying the barriers and proposing viable solutions, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing development of English language pedagogy in China, supporting both language proficiency and academic success.

2. Research background

In the current scenario where the training of English as a foreign language is underway, CBI has been noted to be effective when content teaching and language disciplines are integrated in order to enhance student interest and comprehension (Spenader et al., 2020) [1]. These changes in the approach to pedagogy reflect the move towards recognizing the potential for supporting more effective and meaningful classroom learning for Chinese learners of English in Mainland China. Nevertheless, there are some factors that can have a negative impact on CBI for this group of learners. Many of these difficulties stem from educational situations in which learners are expected to memorize the content and the main emphasis is on tests when learning English.

It is expected that a number of teachers who are tasked with the responsibility of educating the Chinese in English may encounter a number of challenges as they conduct content-based instructions (Sultana & Fang, 2024).[2] Furthermore, the students have a traditional view regarding the language learning process (Maming et al., 2020).[3] However, there are some

cultural beliefs and values that Chinese learners and their families may have as well as their aversion to adopting and applying this progressive approach to instruction due to the tendency to get quick language achievement and pass examinations.

2.1 Problem statement

The introduction of CBI for Chinese learners of English is not without challenges which require further reflection and creative solutions. These challenges include aspects like the mode of learning that has been practiced for years, the likelihood of not being in line with the required competency tests, and the training of teachers who will manage these. In addition, there is little research that addresses questions concerning the applicability of CBI in the context of Chinese learners and the different language and cultural contexts of their learning environment of English (Lin, 2020).[4] This absence of focused studies renders it difficult to develop specific CBI strategies that would more effectively fill in the identified gap between the conventional pedagogical model and the more contextualized, content-integrated approach that is at the heart of CBI. Resolution of these concerns is vital in optimizing CBI and improving comprehension of the English language among Chinese learners.

2.2 Research questions

RQ1: What are the key challenges teachers face while using CBI methods in teaching Chinese learners English?

RQ2: In what ways do conventional expectations of Chinese learners stifle CBI strategies in English as foreign language (EFL) classrooms?

RQ3: What cultural and educational barriers exist that hinder the implementation of content and language-integrated instruction for Chinese EFL students?

2.3 Research significance

Of appreciable value, this study contributes to the development of English language education for Chinese learners. The study of the difficulties in managing CBI is beneficial to try to close this gap for a more adequate approach to the teaching-learning process for this segment of the population. The outcomes will help educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to better understand the specificities of CBI and establish more effective pathways for its application. In addition, this research can contribute to the improvement of the general learning of the English language among Chinese learners as well as mastery of content knowledge.

3. Literature review

Teng & Wang (2024) [5] revealed that one of the difficulties that teachers experience as they endeavor to adopt CBI for Chinese learners of English is high L1 interference among the learners. The basic structure of the English language differs from that of Chinese and this has a great impact when it comes to grammatical structures. For example, many students have problems with the subject-verb agreement, which is different in English due to the topic prominence that Chinese has. This creates problems in understanding and using English material within the context of the CBI framework or across the linguistic divide. This assertion was also supported by Hao et al., (2022) [6] who postulate that first language influence is a key area of focus in vocabulary acquisition. They mention that Chinese learners have much difficulty in understanding English words that have no direct Chinese translation, or those that have multiple meanings based on context, making the process of merging content and language in CBI more challenging.

As pointed out by Zhang & Wu (2021),[7] another key concern is the low level of reading achievement among Chinese EFL learners, which undermines the possibility of CBI. They argue that many Chinese students exhibit weak performance in critical reading for meaning, especially, with full-fledged texts in subject-matter learning domains. This deficiency is attributed to causes such as restricted access to conventional English texts, dependence on translation, and inadequate reading skills (Hu & Wu, 2020).[8] In particular, they experience difficulties in selective attention, such as determining what kind of information is relevant, together with integration and critical evaluation of the content material in English. This reading comprehension deficit does not only affect the subject matter learning but also the learning of academic language which is important in the implementation of CBI.

A concern identified by Qiu et al. (2024) [9] is that poor corrective feedback within a Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment and Content-Based Instruction framework affects EFL students' English writing and grammar learning. As the researchers pointed out, the construction of meaningful content through CBI is designed to combine both language and content acquisitions, yet the special nooks of feedback and how best to provide them in this approach are still obscure. One of the primary challenges is that teachers tend to provide more content-related feedback than feedback related to the choice of words, which can result in excessive inconsistency or insufficient guidance for the student.

Furthermore, this problem is exacerbated in the TSCA approach, where students are assumed to be actively involved in the assessment process. The study indicates that a majority of Chinese learners who participated in the study do not possess the required metalinguistic awareness and critical evaluation parameters to make meaningful contributions to peer assessment exercises. As a result, feedback quality becomes poor and mistakes and misconceptions which learners have may be strengthened through feedback they receive in the L2. This shortcoming in the feedback process can negatively affect the CBI strategy as it fails to provide a comprehensible manner in which students can learn language and content knowledge at the same time.

Sariani et al., (2022) [10] have identified another problem with CBI classroom practices for Chinese students of English, namely the absence of interesting material for learners. According to the researchers, one of the biggest challenges teachers face is the search for content and language-integrated materials. Most of the materials available or offered are either watered down to meet some language level, which makes the information provided intellectually unchallenging. Further, many of these resources present information content that is beyond the linguistic competence of learners to comprehend. This has a negative impact on student motivation and participation in most classes when there is such an imbalance. Thus, it goes against the idea of CBI to make language learning more relevant and interesting to the target audience. Furthermore, the study indicates that it is challenging to find materials that reflect the Chinese learners' experiences and concerns, as well as provide a rich and informative view of the world. This scarcity of appropriate resources adds stress to teachers, who routinely have to modify or generate content, sometimes under time constraints and with limited support.

Another factor that may hinder the implementation of CBI as proposed for Chinese learners of English, as highlighted by Pu & Lu (2021), [11] is cultural differences. The researchers recognize that the source of many cultural contents used in CBI materials comes from Western countries and fails to resonate with Chinese students' cultural context, thus resulting in confusion and disinterest. Knowledge and ideas that are normal for students from the Western world can be totally new and sometimes even misleading to Chinese learners thus making it very difficult for them to understand or participate fully in a particular topic. Moreover, it mentions that open discussions and critical analysis that are natural in CBI may contradict the Chinese students' cultural values that do not entertain challenges and disputes with teachers and peers. These cultural disparities transform into strong barriers to CBI execution.

4. Research objectives

The purpose of this research is to provide a broad systematic approach to synthesize the difficulties of adopting CBI for Chinese learners of English from teacher and learner viewpoints. Firstly, the aims of this study are as follows: to pinpoint and understand the major challenges educators encounter when implementing CBI approaches in the Chinese learners' context. This entails language, culture, and education factors. Furthermore, the study aims to explore the different CBI approaches that students experience or perceive. This will encompass areas like the extent of participation, understanding and the extent of learning achieved. Thus, the study plans to collect and compare the data from various stakeholders to gain a richer understanding of the challenges that surround CBI implementation for this type of learner. Finally, the study aims to present the practical findings on how CBI could be made more effective, how teacher training programs could be improved, and how the curriculum could be adjusted to adapt to the needs of Chinese learners who learn English in a content-based context.

5. Research methodology

5.1 Research design

This research will use a mixed methods approach in an endeavor to identify challenges in implementing CBI for Chinese learners of English. This approach can be used effectively if the aim of the research is to capture the participant's experience, perception, and insights of teachers and students. Through surveys, focus groups, and class observation, this study will seek to unearth contextual and cultural characteristics that may limit or support the implementation of CBI intervention. The mixed methods design is important as it will allow me to gather deeper details of the topic of study especially as far as education practice and beliefs are concerned. Hence, through this technique, it becomes possible to know the factors that may enhance or even hamper the implementation of CBI in Mainland China. Consequently, it contributes to the integration of specific approaches to promote CBI for this particular group of learners. Moreover, since this research design will involve human participants, the research will embrace several ethical considerations. This will include biodata anonymization and permission seeking before the start of data collection.

5.2 Data collection methods

The research will use both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to gather rich knowledge on the barriers

to CBI for Chinese learners of English. The participants, who are educators, will be asked a series of quantitative questions to reveal their experiences and challenges as well as the strategies they use. The data collection tool for students will entail the use of a focus group with the students for an understanding of their perceptions, experiences, and cultural identities. Observations of classrooms will offer information about the processes of CBI and how it interrelates with conventional classroom practices. These methods will collectively provide a diverse approach towards the study to ensure that all aspects of the educational as well as cultural barriers to effective CBI are embraced while conducting the study.

5.3 The sampling strategy

The sample selection will use purposive sampling to allow for the selection of proper and relevant participants. It will involve reaching out to experienced English teachers, school administrators, and Chinese students learning English at different levels of education. Including participants from different regions and types of schools will help to achieve a diverse sample and obtain a wider perspective of the issue. This sample selection is meant to provide a diversification of areas where CBI is used to cut across various areas to give a comprehensive result. It will also help in defining the commonality and divergence and thus aid in adding increased validity and richness to the study.

5.4 Data analysis techniques

In this study, thematic analysis will be adopted as a way of providing a systematic approach to the evaluation of the collected qualitative data. It involves coming up with a research agenda to gather data, the actual gathering of the data, analyzing the information, and then forming conclusions on the patterns or trends that have been depicted. These steps will include data familiarization and then the data analysis which entails developing the initial codes in Excel. These codes will then be bundled to potential themes which will again be sampled to judge if they are related or unrelated to the data and its information. This intensive approach will provide a more detailed examination of the sort of challenges faced in the process of implementing CBI and the positive findings that may inform policy and practice in education.

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