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IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS IN B1 LEARNERS USING CONTENT-BASED TECHNIQUES

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Abstract. Speaking is a component of communicative competence but B1 level English learners often have difficulties expressing opinions, carrying on conversations and using appropriate vocabulary. This article explores how CBI can develop speaking skills in intermediate EFL learners (based on previous theoretical and empirical research). Discussions, debates, problem solving activities, project-based learning and authentic materials are ways to promote oral communication. Analysis shows that meaningful content combined with language learning gives learners opportunities for fluency, range of vocabulary and confidence; however scaffolding and grammatical accuracy need to be taken into account when implementing CBI. Content based techniques can create more engaging and communicative learning environment for B1 students.
Keywords: Content-Based Instruction; speaking skills; B1 learners; EFL; communicative competence; authentic materials; language teaching.

Introduction. Speaking is one of the main goals in foreign language education because communication skills are more than grammar and vocabulary; learners need to express ideas, exchange information, justify opinions and respond appropriately to different situations as well. B1 students usually have linguistic knowledge sufficient for talking about familiar topics but may find it difficult to spontaneously speak, organise their thoughts, maintain fluency or use more advanced vocabulary. This is because in traditional language classrooms there are few opportunities for meaningful communication. CBI provides a possible solution by linking language learning with meaningful subject matter: instead of studying structures in isolation students develop English through topics (exploration), ideas (discussion) and communicative tasks (tasks). The aim of this article is to see how content-based techniques can improve speaking skills among B1 learners and what teaching strategies are available for communicative development.

Theoretical Background and Previous Research.

Content-Based Instruction is an approach that combines language learning with study of meaningful subject matter. Stoller (2004) says the main characteristic is integration of two objectives: language proficiency and knowledge about particular topics (e.g., a lesson on environmental protection can introduce vocabulary related to this topic but also encourage students to talk about pollution, climate change and solutions). So language becomes not only object of study but tool for communication as well. Several researchers have looked at content-based instruction and speaking development. Afsahi & Chalak (2016) studied Iranian intermediate EFL learners under student-

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centred content-based instruction and found that speaking performance of students in the content-based environment (student-centred group) was better than those in teacher centred group. Lai and Aksornjarung (2017) studied 81 Thai university students taking a 14 weeks content-based English course. They found improvements in speaking and listening abilities but also stressed the need for appropriate learning materials and support for different proficiency levels. Mart (2019) examined form-focused, content based and mixed approaches to literature-based instruction. They found that meaningful discussions should be combined with attention to grammatical structures but fluency and accuracy should not be treated as separate goals. Overall, these studies show that content-based instruction can create favorable conditions for language development if learners participate in meaningful communication.

Effective Content-Based Techniques for B1 Learners:

Several techniques can be used to encourage intermediate learners to communicate more confidently and effectively:

1) Content-Based Discussions and Debates:

Teachers present topics (education, technology, social media or environmental problems). Students state opinions, support arguments and respond to different points of view. ("Does technology make education more effective?") leads students to use expressions such as "from my point of view", "one major advantage is" and "I partly agree because". Fluency, argumentation and organisation of ideas are developed this way.

2) Problem-Solving Activities.

Students are given a real-life or imaginary situation and work together to find solutions (e.g., suggest ways of improving their university environment with limited resources). Negotiation, explanation and decision making are promoted in such activities but learners must use English for a purpose as well.

3) Project Based Learning:

Students research a topic, collect information and present it to classmates (compare educational systems, research cultural traditions or technology). Presentation skills are developed, vocabulary, logical organisation and independent learning too.

4) Information-Gap Activities:

Students get different pieces of information and have to communicate in order to complete the shared task: they ask questions, share details and clarify information. These are great for developing interactional competence because learners need to maintain conversations and respond spontaneously.

5) Authentic materials and video-based discussions:

Teachers provide short documentaries, interviews, podcasts and educational videos as meaningful content. Students' summaries what they have seen or heard then discuss their opinions. Listening is linked to speaking and vocabulary and expressions used in real life are introduced (see below for how these stages can be implemented in practice).

To show how these stages could work in practice the following example shows a content-based speaking activity divided into three stages.

CBI Speaking Activity.

Topic: The Impact of Technology on Education

Pre-communicative Stage: Students read a short B1 text or watch a brief educational video about technology in classrooms (main advantages and disadvantages). Vocabulary related to online learning,

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access to information, digital skills and distraction are reviewed. Teacher checks comprehension and gives useful expressions for giving opinions.

Communicative Stage: Students work in small groups and ask the question "Does technology make education more effective?" They use information from the text or video to back up their opinions, compare advantages and disadvantages, agree on two recommendations for using technology effectively in education.

Post-communicative stage: Each group presents its recommendations to the class briefly. Students think about most convincing ideas, teacher gives delayed feedback on vocabulary, fluency and selected grammatical errors. In this activity we show how meaningful content can be integrated with structured speaking practice (with learners getting opportunities to develop fluency, vocabulary and communicative competence).

Practical Implementation and Assessment.

Content-based lessons need to be structured in order to be implemented successfully. First, the teacher introduces a topic and activates students' background knowledge. Second learners read/listen/watch video to find out more about the topic. Third, the teacher provides vocabulary and useful grammar structures. Fourth students participate in discussions or presentations or problem-solving tasks.

Speaking development should be assessed according to several criteria:

Assessment criteria:

Fluency - the ability to speak smoothly and maintain communication

Vocabulary - the range and appropriate use of words and expressions

Grammatical accuracy - the correct use of linguistic structures

Coherence - the logical organization of ideas

Pronunciation - the clarity and intelligibility of speech Interaction the ability to respond, ask questions and maintain conversations

Feedback.

Teachers should also give feedback (constructive) without interrupting every speaking activity. Too much correction may reduce learners' willingness to communicate; important errors can then be discussed after the activity.

The reviewed studies show that CBI makes speaking lessons more purposeful and motivating: when learners talk about meaningful things they have reasons to communicate (longer responses, more active participation). Another benefit is contextualised vocabulary learning — students encounter new expressions in meaningful situations and are given opportunities to use them in different communicative tasks. But there are also some drawbacks of CBI: if the content chosen is too difficult learners cannot understand it and participate properly; if meaning alone is focused on then grammatical accuracy will not be paid enough attention. So teachers should choose materials at B1 level and linguistic scaffolding (vocabulary lists, useful expressions etc.) targeted grammatical explanations (only for specific sentences). A balanced approach based on meaningful communication and language-focused feedback seems to work better than either one used separately.

Conclusion. In this article we have explored the role of Content-Based Instruction in developing speaking skills among B1 English learners. Previous research shows that when meaningful subject matter is integrated into language lessons opportunities for fluency, vocabulary, coherence and communicative confidence can be created: content-based discussions, debates, problem-solving

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activities, project-based learning, information-gap tasks and authentic materials can motivate learners to use English actively and independently; but successful implementation requires appropriate materials, lesson planning and linguistic support (grammar accuracy, pronunciation). Communicative activities should be balanced with attention to grammar and pronunciation. Content-Based Instruction therefore offers an important way of developing speaking skills at the intermediate level because it turns language learning into a meaningful process of communication, exploration and interaction.

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