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Combining Content- and Task-Based Learning at primary level: ways, reasons, challenges

In den frühen 1990er Jahren mochte es vorübergehend so scheinen, als sei die Zeit der grossen Methodendebatten in der Fremdsprachendidaktik Englisch vorbei und ein kommunikativer Ansatz mit starkem grammatischem Unterbau habe sich als mehrheitsfähiger Kompromiss durchgesetzt. Die Diskussion hat sich jedoch inzwischen auf neue Schwerpunkte verlagert. Im Zentrum steht nun die Frage nach den zur Förderung der sprachlich-kommunikativen Kompetenzen am besten geeigneten Vorgehensweisen. Das verbreitet praktizierte Unterrichtsmodell «Presentation, Practice, Production» steht heute immer stärker in der Kritik. Eines der bekanntesten Alternativmodelle ist der aufgabenbasierte (task-based) Unterricht. Die Autorin vertritt den Standpunkt, dass sich dieser in Verbindung mit einem fächerübergreifenden, inhaltsorientierten Zugang besonders gut für die Primarstufe eignet und zeigt einige wichtige Voraussetzungen auf, die für eine gelungene Umsetzung dieses kombinierten Zugangs notwendig sind. Dazu gehören unter anderem eine den Erfordernissen des Modells angepasste Progression, gezielte sprachliche Unterstützung bei der Realisierung von Tasks, die systematische Förderung von Lerntechniken und Sprachstrategien sowie gewisse Veränderungen in der Rolle der Lehrperson.

At a teacher development seminar I attended a good fifteen years ago, the speaker cheerfully announced the dawning of a new era: The profession had now arrived in the “post-method” age, he declared, leaving behind the ideological battles and endless “paradigm shifts” of the past and teachers free to pick, mix and match whatever techniques and practices suited them best in their respective contexts.

With hindsight, it looks as if the post-method era has at least been short-lived, if not simply a myth. The informed eclectic who is free to choose – or create – whatever materials suit her or him, who has a vast repertoire of teaching techniques ready at his or her fingertips, who has sufficient time and expertise to keep up with the latest developments in the field and continually take on board what seems useful certainly does not represent the majority of foreign language teachers around the world. At primary and lower secondary level, especially in state schools, foreign languages are often taught not by specialists, but by “general practitioners” who also teach a range of other subjects. Furthermore, continuity needs to be ensured at points of transition from one level of the education system to the next (or from one teacher to the next, from one school to the other). This calls for a relatively high degree of coordination, which is usually attempted via set curricular objectives and, in most cases, set classroom materials as well.

Looking at the mainstream of ELT materials currently on the market, one might indeed conclude that the major disputes of the past have been settled and a compromise reached:

The materials all profess to develop communicative skills at the same time as placing a strong emphasis on grammar, and increasingly also on vocabulary. Mostly, they could be classified as “weak-version communicative” (cf. Richards & Rogers, 1986: 66). Whereas one might be hard-put to find a course which could be described as “audiolingual” or “grammar-translation” nowadays, a structural syllabus still underlies most published materials.

The debate, meanwhile, has moved on. Some time in the 1990’s the focus seems to have shifted away from fundamental disagreements about the nature of language proficiency and the basic psychological processes involved in achieving it to matters of syllabus design. In due course the field became increasingly concerned with “models and frameworks”; i.e. questions of procedure.

The PPP which is called TBL – how much do frameworks matter?

The predominant “PPP” model (Presentation, Practice, Production) came under increasing criticism for its perceived inflexibility or inadequacy. In *Learning Teaching*, Scrivener proposed “ARC” (Authentic use, Restricted use, Clarification and focus – to be applied in any order) as a more flexible alternative (1994: 133ff.). Six years later, Kent provided an overview of five different frameworks that had all been proposed as alternatives to PPP, to which he added his own. The following table (fig.1) is an expanded

70's main-stream communicative approach (PPP)	Jim Scrivener (ARC)	Jeremy Harmer	Michael Lewis	Derrin Kent (TOPIC)	TTT	Scott Thornbury (Text and Task)	Paul Emerson (ROLO – reformulate output lightly but often)	Jean Willis (TBL)
	(Authentic use)	Engage		Task/Text (as vehicle for information)	Test (diagnose)		Production	
Presentation (meeting new language)	Clarification and Focus	Study	Observe	Observe form (text as linguistic object)	Teach (fill knowledge gaps)	Text	Focus and Feedback	Pre-task (introduction to topic and task)
Practice (manipulating language)	Restricted Use	Activate	Hypothesise	Prepare (thematically and linguistically)	Test (assess)	Task	Production	Task cycle (task, planning, report)
Production (,transfer' stage)	Authentic use		Experiment	Interact (Performance, outcomes)			Focus and Feedback	Language Focus (analysis and practice)
	(Clarification and focus)			Conclude and clarify form				
order of stages as above	stages in any order			order of stages as above	cycle can be repeated as needed		stages alternate	order of stages as above

fig. 1

version I have based on the one presented in his article (2001: 25-29).

Kent comments: "...we can conclude that we need to engage a need for language items, highlight language in such a way that learners respond 'Aha! I get it' and ... provide them with practice activities and communicative activities." (28). In other words, however different the models may look at first sight, everybody still seems to be doing the three P's. The only difference is in the order!

It can be reassuring for teachers attending in-service courses (especially

those who have been in the profession long enough to have witnessed the rise and fall of more than one doctrine and may be quite cynical about "the latest fashion") to have it pointed out to them that the new change of paradigm is not yet another case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. However, as will quickly become clear to any course participant, there are wider-ranging implications to such a change of model than a mere reordering and re-labelling of stages. As Kent's original diagram further shows, the different models are situated on a continuum from presentation-led to use-led (fig.2).

The arguments in favour of a more use-led model are well known, have been much debated in connection with task-based and task-oriented methodologies, and will not be dealt with in detail here. Suffice it to mention two points briefly: Firstly, as every practitioner knows, PPP does not work in the way it is supposed to. If it did, conscientious language learners would rarely make any mistakes and would progress steadily by absorbing and applying bit by bit what they are taught. Instead, new "bits" of language, however carefully presented and extensively practised, tend to go

Presentation	Authentic use	Engage	Observe	Task/ Text	Test	Text	Production	Pre-task
Practice	Restricted use	Study	Hypothesise	Observe form	Teach	Task	Focus and Feedback	Task cycle
Production	Clarification and focus	Activate	Experiment	Prepare	Test		Production	Language focus
				Interact			...	
				Conclude and clarify				

proactive focus on form <-----> reactive focus on form
accuracy <-----> *leads to* <-----> *fluency*
focus on form <-----> *communicate*
teaching-centred <-----> *learning-centred*

fig. 2

Many scenarios have a project-like character, with the individual task outcomes serving as steps along the way to a larger scenario outcome such as an exhibition, a booklet, or a musical performance.

clean out of the students' minds at the production stage or as soon as the next "bit" comes around and may not be absorbed into their spontaneous repertoire for months or years to come, if at all. Which rather suggests that – whatever the nature of the syllabus – the learners' actual progression will inevitably be cyclical. Secondly, any model based on a linear progression of language items would limit the scope for subject-matter learning and communication so severely that genuine cross-curricular teaching would become impossible. Such models are therefore *a priori* unsuitable for the CLIL classroom.

Why go cross-curricular?

Second language acquisition research is still a relatively young science. Activity in the field centres around the gathering and interpreting of empirical data and continues to be characterised more by controversy over hypotheses than the establishment of irrefutable facts. Nevertheless, there are certain insights on which a high degree of consensus seems to exist; among them are the following:

- The acquisition of any language (whether first, second or a further one) is a process of active and creative construction rather than one of mere imitation and rote memorisation. Learners need to form and test hypotheses (and may do so consciously as well as subconsciously), even if the structures of the language are presented to them explicitly within an instructional context.
- Exposure to meaningful language input is a key condition for acquisition to take place. Most researchers and practitioners would also agree that opportunities for purposeful language use are needed for the learner to become truly fluent (Willis, 1996: 11), although there have been studies which seem to suggest

that languages can be acquired successfully even if opportunities for use are absent or delayed (Lightbown & Spada, 1999: 129).

If we accept that the decoding and encoding of meaning is at the heart of the language acquisition process, and if we also accept that this process is governed to a certain extent by laws or mechanisms outside a teacher's direct control, it follows that approaches to classroom learning must be found that place meaning at their centre. This idea forms the basis of the Communicative Approach. However, whereas in mainstream Communicative Language Teaching, subject-matter content is of secondary importance and mostly of a very general, cognitively undemanding, nature, the main criterion being that it should foster language learning, the priorities are reversed in a content-based approach: Here it is content which leads the way and language is its vehicle – a medium of instruction as much as a curricular subject in its own right.

As Brewster and Ellis (2002) observe, an approach which links foreign language learning to other subjects on the curriculum has become increasingly popular at primary level since the 1990s. There are several important arguments in favour of such an approach:

Educational relevance:

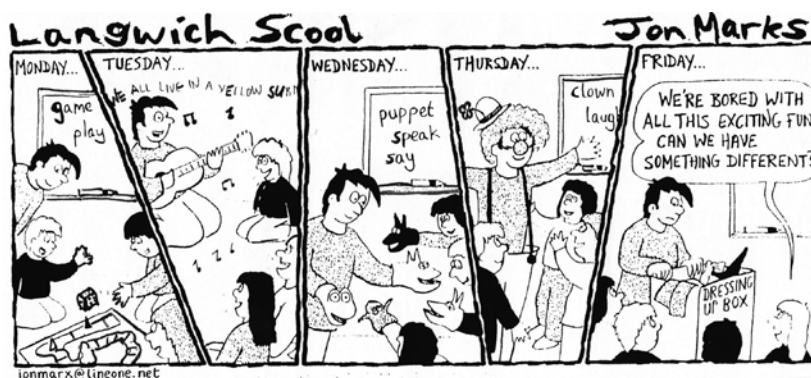
- "In order to be of value, a learning experience should contribute to a person's whole education as well as to their learning of... the language" (Williams & Burdon, 1997: 204)

Immediacy:

- Children are not very good at learning things merely for later use, and they "do not have specific foreign language needs" (Brewster & Ellis, 2002: 27). They learn best what they can use immediately in the here and now.
- Topics which are connected to the general curriculum create opportunities for real communication in the classroom. Moon (2000) makes the point that cross-curricular language learning takes account of how children learn by "involving them in activities which focus on meaning, in which they experience things at first hand using many senses,... and which capitalize on their desire to socialize and communicate with each other" (119).

Authenticity:

- On the whole, children do not need



“tourist English”. If this is covered at a later age, when travelling on their own becomes a real option, they can easily transfer to it a number of general functions that they have already learned in different contexts.

- Similarly, children who do not live in an English-speaking environment have little use for “playground English”.
- A content-based approach does not neglect general functional language for social purposes as communication in a content-based language classroom requires those, too.

Time efficiency:

- Creating synergies across the curriculum makes better use of the limited classroom time available.
- With a content-based approach, English lessons reinforce the learning taking place in other subjects.

TBL as a framework for content-based learning

Primary-level methodology as currently taught at Swiss universities of teacher education is based on a constructivist view of the learning process, by which the child is “seen as an active agent in his or her own learning, selecting, retaining and transforming information to construct knowledge which is shaped by his or her unique way of seeing and interpreting the world” (Brewster & Ellis, 2002: 30, referring to Bruner, 1983). In practice, this means that pupils are encouraged to explore subject matter, form hypotheses and draw their own conclusions.

When the upper primary English course materials, *Explorers* (Achermann *et al.*, 2006), were at the planning stage, the project team had a series of meetings with teacher educators from the field of “Mensch und Umwelt”, which comprises the subject areas of geography, science and technology,

history as well as personal, social and health education. The aim of these meetings was to explore the possibilities of basing the new three-year English course materials on an interdisciplinary approach. It soon became apparent that there were many important parallels in the ways that both sides had increasingly come to view learning in their respective fields, so that it would indeed be possible to establish cross-curricular connections that would extend beyond the sharing of content to general pedagogic principles, and – as it turned out – interestingly, even to the procedural level. Both sides attached a fair degree of importance to providing teachers with a suitable framework to structure their teaching, and the framework which the “Mensch und Umwelt” experts presented to the language experts (fig.3) showed remarkable similarities to a task-based language learning framework such as the one proposed by Willis (fig.4).

Taking those two frameworks as a starting point, the *Explorers* team designed a modular structure into

which tasks and language work could be embedded with some degree of flexibility: Each thematic *Module* consists of three or four *Scenarios* – dynamic communicative settings representing different aspects of the module topic. A scenario in turn is composed of a pre-task (called *What’s it all about?*), followed by four to six *Tasks* – step-by-step action plans leading to concrete outcomes. Language focus work takes place in a variety of ways: between tasks, integrated within a task, or occasionally even as (language discovery) tasks in their own right. Many scenarios have a project-like character, with the individual task outcomes serving as steps along the way to a larger scenario outcome such as an exhibition, a booklet, or a musical performance.

It follows that the language syllabus of the course is not based on a pre-determined grammatical progression, but instead on the definition of a repertoire of communicative language competences needed to achieve a range of outcomes. This repertoire is built up cyclically; i.e. through repeated cycles of exposure and use – as well

“Mensch und Umwelt” framework (translated from Gudjons in Müller & Adamina, 2000)

1. Pre-task:

Introduction to topic and task (exploring the topic, activating existing knowledge, highlighting useful words and phrases, understanding task instructions)

2. Task-cycle:

Carrying out the task

Planning the report

Reporting on the task outcome (either orally or by means of a written product)

3. Language Focus: analysis and practice of specific linguistic features arising from the task

fig. 3

Willis’ TBL framework (cf. Willis, 1996: 38)

1. Identifying a problem, becoming aware of a reason to act

2. Planning action

3. Realising the planned action

4. Evaluating the results of the action and what was learned through the process

fig. 4

as language analysis and practice – in varying thematic contexts (fig. 5).



fig. 5

Thus, a structure which the learners encounter receptively right from the start of the course may be introduced as part of a ready-made functional “chunk” to be used actively in a given situation for the first time towards the end of course year One and may first become the subject of a language focus phase at the beginning of the second year. Input always being richer than expected output, only those structures which are deemed appropriate to the learners’ level will pass through the whole cycle. Similarly, out of a total of approximately 5000 lexical items the learners encounter in spoken and written texts, just under 900 are defined as target vocabulary to be revised and practised for active use. The main purpose of pre-defining a core language syllabus is to give teachers the necessary security and ensure continuity, but is certainly not meant to preclude opportunistic focus on form when occasions arise spontaneously.

Supporting the learner

TBLsceptics often criticise the suggestion that learners should draw freely on all of their existing language resources while completing a task as unworkable in the beginners’ or elementary-level classroom. Swan (2005: 388) after quoting Willis (1996:24) comments: “The question of where the ‘words and phrases acquired previously’ come from is not generally very clearly addressed in the TBI literature.”

Indeed, in the early stages of learning a new language, learners have very few linguistic resources to draw on and are unlikely to use the target language for much of the time while completing their tasks. Getting the product ready for the report stage may be painstakingly slow as long as the learners still depend on a great deal of monitoring

to help them get started, but they will need further support at various stages throughout the task. Task-related support can either be built into the course materials or provided on the spot by the teacher, depending on its nature. The following table (fig. 6) contains examples of both:

Language support during the task cycle

Comprehension support	Production support
Accompanying listening or reading texts with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visuals (photos, illustrations, graphs, films) • Mime and gesture • Action, demonstration • Redundance, repetition • Pre-, while- and post-reading questions designed to focus the learners’ attention, trigger the noticing of certain language elements and stimulate the use of relevant reading / listening strategies 	Interactive speaking in pairs and groups: Providing functional support (phrases, structures, lexis) in the form of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speech bubbles • substitution tables • model dialogues • word banks Teacher-learner interaction: Scaffolding learner contributions by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expanding • reformulating • eliciting / prompting Productive speaking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient preparation time • Explicit strategy hints regarding planning, rehearsing and delivery Guided writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sentence starters • Writing frames • Charts and diagrams Free writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process writing (practice and feedback for all the different stages of the writing process, from brainstorming to editing) • Using information resources such as dictionaries, grammars, the Internet

fig. 6

and support. Even with the best classroom management skills imaginable, the teacher cannot be everywhere, helping everyone all the time. To be able to complete tasks successfully, the learners therefore need to be supported in various ways by prompts, explicit strategy training and the provision of adequate self-access resources. At the pre-task stage they will have had a chance to activate previous knowledge as well as being supplied with some useful language

Modern language course materials increasingly contribute to learner training by actively promoting the use of strategies. These should include research strategies, as skilled use of information media is an important learning strategy in that it helps the learner to become more self-directed (cf. Oxford, 1990). In some cases, tailor-made resource materials (such as dictionaries, reference grammars, collections of model texts, etc.) are provided with the course. This is

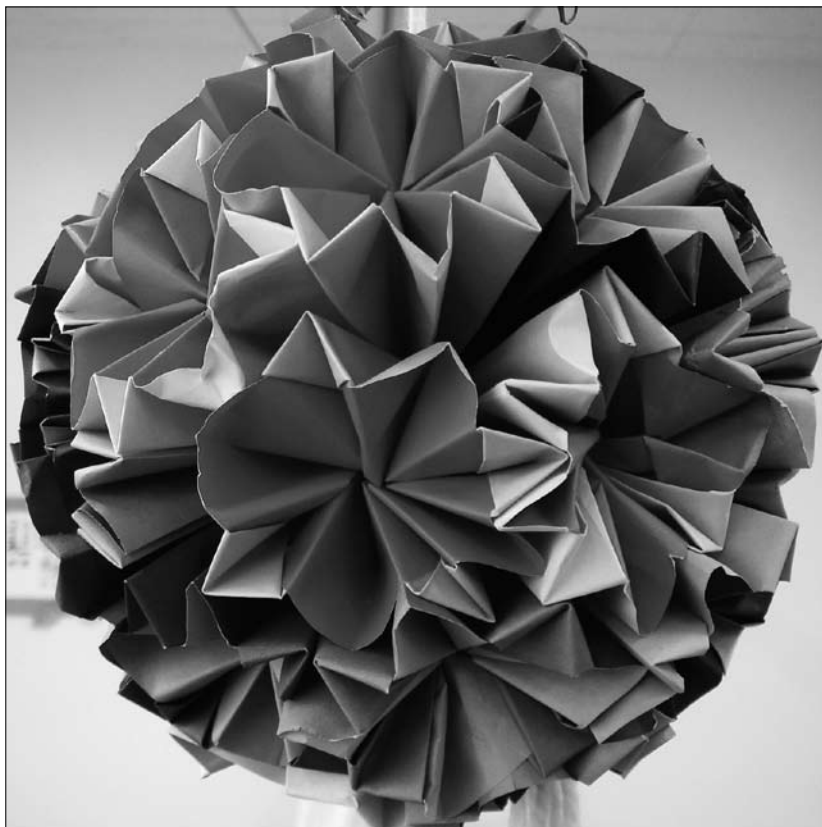
especially helpful for young learners at primary level, who may not yet be ready to tackle standard dictionaries and reference works designed for adults.

The teacher's task

Inevitably, a change of methodology brings with it certain changes to the roles of teachers and learners. In the task-based classroom, it is not just the learners who become immersed in tasks – the teacher takes on new tasks as well. When beginning to work in this way, s/he will need to guide the learners to ensure that they are able to follow task instructions and use all the materials and resources required for the task effectively. The amount of time and effort invested at this stage may seem disproportionate to the amount of actual language learning or subject-matter learning taking place, which

can make it tempting for teachers to give up and return to a more teacher-led classroom routine. It is important, however, that they remain confident that this initial investment will pay off once the learners gain skill in working on tasks. As the learners' independence increases, the teacher can gradually reduce pro-active support, thereby becoming less and less of an "explainer" of language and more the "enabler" of language learning (terms borrowed from Scrivener, 1994: 6).

Some teachers embrace this change of role wholeheartedly and respond with enthusiasm to being offered concrete tools to help them carry out the new tasks that come with it. For others, it may take a leap of faith – one that is essential if TBL is to be made to work.



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