

## TEACHING ENGLISH WITHOUT TEACHING ENGLISH

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### Abstract

This article presents an approach to teaching English by focusing on content rather than grammar. It argues that meaningful communication and immersive content can help learners pick up the language more naturally and effectively than traditional grammar-based methods. By reviewing research and practical examples, the article shows how a content-driven approach makes learning more engaging and effective for students.

**Keywords:** Content-based instruction (CBI), Communicative language teaching (CLT), Language acquisition, Immersive learning, Grammatical accuracy, Content over form,  $i+1$ , Implicit grammar learning, Communicative practice, Authentic language use.

### Introduction

Language learning is often framed with learning grammar rules, which can overshadow the importance of understanding meaningful content and expressing thoughts, feelings to a listener, which are the main points of learning any language. In language learning process, shifting the focus from grammar to content-driven communication can lead to more authentic language acquisition experiences. This approach aligns with contemporary pedagogical theories that advocate for language learning through real-life contexts and communicative practice.

Several studies (Brinton et al., 2003; Kasper, 1997; Stoller, 2004) showed that students who engaged in content-based instruction (CBI) became more confident in their language skills while also expanding their knowledge of the subject matter. These students were better prepared for regular academic courses compared to those who focused only on language learning. In addition to performing better academically, learners exposed to CBI generally achieved greater overall academic success (Kasper, 1997).

Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis can be another good method and suggests that for language acquisition to occur, learners should be exposed to input that is just beyond their current ability, often referred to as  $i + 1$ . Importantly, this input doesn't have to be carefully planned or focus on particular language structures. If learners are engaged in meaningful communication, they'll naturally encounter the language elements they need to progress.

In the late 1970s, Widdowson (1978) introduced the idea of combining language learning with content, which later became more popular because of Brinton, Snow, and Wesche's work (2003). Focusing on content rather than form involves immersing learners in meaningful language use that prioritizes communication over accuracy. This method

aligns with the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), which emphasizes interaction and functional use of language as central to the learning process. The underlying idea is that language acquisition occurs more naturally when learners are engaged in a meaningful communication, rather than through isolated grammar rules. This approach mirrors the experiences of native language acquisition, where children learn to speak fluently by interacting with their environment before formal grammar instruction.

Another crucial aspect of teaching English is explaining students to embrace mistakes as a fundamental part of the learning process. The notion that "if you want to learn a language, you must be willing to make mistakes" reflects the understanding that errors are integral to discovering linguistic boundaries and improving proficiency. Stephen Krashen emphasizes that making mistakes is a valuable part of learning a new language. Although his primary focus is on Comprehensible Input - giving learners language exposure just slightly beyond their current level - he also highlights the importance of Comprehensible Output, where using the language actively (like through speaking and writing) allows learners to practice, make mistakes, and grow. In this view, mistakes are not setbacks but essential feedback that helps learners improve their communication skills without the pressure of perfect grammar, fostering a comfortable and supportive learning environment. When learners are encouraged to experiment with language and make mistakes, they engage in a process of trial and error that leads to greater linguistic awareness and skill development.

In this approach, feedback is provided in a context-sensitive manner, addressing mistakes within the framework of the content being studied. This method not only helps learners understand the rules implicitly but also improves their language through practical use. By focusing on content, learners are more likely to notice and correct their own mistakes, thus internalizing grammatical rules organically. Wesche and Skehan (2002) supported this from a second language learning context where learners "master both language and content through a reciprocal process" (p. 220).

Implementing a content-focused approach in the classroom involves several strategies. Teachers can design activities that integrate language use with subject matter content, such as project-based learning, debates, and role-plays. These activities provide opportunities for learners to engage with the language in authentic contexts, fostering both communication skills and grammatical accuracy indirectly.

For instance, in a lesson centered around environmental issues, students might research and discuss topics related to Environment. While their primary focus is on the content, the language used in these discussions naturally includes various grammatical structures. This approach allows learners to practice and internalize language forms in a meaningful context.

Teaching English without overtly teaching English by emphasizing content over form presents a compelling alternative to traditional grammar-focused instruction. By prioritizing meaningful communication and authentic language use, learners are better

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positioned to acquire language skills naturally and effectively. This approach not only enhances engagement but also aligns with the intrinsic nature of language learning, where immersion in content leads to implicit understanding of linguistic rules. As educators continue to explore innovative teaching methodologies, focusing on content-driven instruction offers a valuable perspective on facilitating language acquisition.

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