

Bringing Real-World Topics Into Language Classrooms Through Content-Based Language Teaching: An EFL Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

This contribution presents an exploratory case study focused on the initial implementation of the Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) approach in a lower secondary foreign language classroom in the Czech Republic. The aim is to examine the lived experience of a novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher as they incorporate real-world topics – specifically media literacy – into their lessons, aiming to create an engaging classroom environment through authentic materials and content relevant to students' lives. The study employs qualitative methodology, with data collected over a five-week period through classroom observations, reflective journaling, and semi-structured interviews with the teacher. Thematic analysis revealed key aspects of their experience, including evolving instructional practices, perceived challenges, and the development of content-based strategies. Findings suggest that authentic content increased student engagement and fostered critical thinking, though the teacher struggled to balance linguistic and cognitive demands, particularly with unadapted materials. Notably, the experience prompted a shift in the teacher's pedagogical mindset toward more purposeful and relevant instruction. While exploratory in nature, the study offers insights into the challenges and opportunities of adopting CBLT, emphasizing the importance of teacher support, targeted preparation, and reflective practice in enabling effective implementation and instructional change.

Keywords: content-based language teaching, CBLT, language teaching, foreign language teachers

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Introduction

Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), also known as Content-Based Instruction (CBI), is an instructional approach that integrates meaningful and relevant subject matter into foreign language education. Its main goal is to create an authentic learning environment that simultaneously develops students' foreign language proficiency and deepens their understanding of various content areas. CBLT has its roots in Canadian immersion education programs that emerged in the 1960s, in which students learned school subjects such as science or history through their second language (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). These programs emphasized the importance of meaningful content in language acquisition and contributed to the growth of CBLT in North America during the 1980s and 1990s, amid a broader shift toward communicative language teaching (Genesee, 1987). The model has been further developed into English for Specific and Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP) contexts, which aim to equip learners with language skills essential for academic success. Over time, CBLT became closely associated with other integrative approaches, such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) in Europe and sheltered instruction in the United States, all of which share the same goal –integrating content learning with language development.

The CBLT approach allows for a flexible definition of "content". It can be derived from academic disciplines like science and history, or from cross-curricular subjects such as media literacy, environmental education and global citizenship. However, it is essential that the content be cognitively stimulating, engaging, and relevant to learners' interests and needs (Genesee, 1994; Met, 1999). Another characteristic of CBLT is that it can be implemented across a variety of educational settings. In early childhood and elementary education, it may take the form of theme- and play-based instruction. In the secondary school context, it aligns well with project-based or interdisciplinary learning. At the university level, it is most implemented through English for Academic or Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP), engaging students with discipline-specific academic content and language.

The flexible nature of CBLT is best described as a continuum proposed by Met (1999). At the content-driven end are full immersion programs where subject learning is at the forefront of instruction and language is acquired implicitly. Toward the center are models such as sheltered instruction and partial immersion, which balance content and language focus. At the language-driven end are theme-based or ESP/EAP programs, in which language acquisition remains the primary goal and content is used to achieve that objective. Educators can thus tailor this approach to suit the needs of diverse age groups, educational contexts and objectives.

A successful implementation of CBLT depends on several factors, such as institutional support or availability of materials and resources, but most importantly, teachers' preparedness to integrate both language and content instruction (Horn, 2011), as well as their beliefs and attitudes toward teaching and learning (Markee, 1993). The interplay of these factors shapes how CBLT is implemented in real-world educational contexts, however, the perspective of the teacher and their experience with the practical realities of using CBLT are the central focus of the following case study.

Case Study

This exploratory case study investigates the early implementation of Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) by a novice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher in a

lower secondary school in the Czech Republic. The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the teacher's initial experience with this instructional approach, including perceived benefits, encountered challenges, and the strategies employed to manage both content and language objectives in the classroom.

Theoretical Background

The experiences of teachers who have implemented CBLT in their classrooms have been examined in detail by Cammarata (2009, 2010) in order to identify the challenges faced during this process. The author observed that despite the challenges, teachers found the process rewarding as it forced them to reflect more deeply on their practice and learn new ways of teaching. Cammarata stressed that with the right training and support, the process could be less challenging for teachers (Cammarata, 2009). Pessoa et al. (2007) explored attitudes towards the use of CBLT among two teachers and found that their personal beliefs had the most significant influence on its implementation. Although they perceived the challenges associated with the process positively, their experiences of using CBLT in practice had different characteristics. While the first teacher found the matching of content and language too challenging and preferred explicit grammar instruction, the second teacher reported that he viewed CBLT as a much more beneficial and enjoyable way of teaching because it created an authentic context for language learning. Although the teachers followed the same curriculum, materials, and resources, their experiences and perceptions differed considerably. This study shows that more than context and environment, the factors that determine the success of CBLT are largely dependent on teachers' attitudes and preferences, which highlights their crucial role in the process of implementing CBLT.

In his studies, Martel (2018) points to the need to examine teachers' identity construction processes to provide them with adequate support and environment for their development. He also highlights the need to provide ongoing support in the form of mentoring so that teachers adopt new teaching practices and transform their practice. More specific aspects of CBLT implementation include, for example, efforts to balance language- and content-focused instructional goals, which have been shown to be the most crucial and common in a number of studies (Baecher et al., 2013; Bigelow & Ranney, 2005; Spenader et al., 2018). These have shown that although teachers initially tended to lean toward language-focused goals, they gradually learned to formulate goals with both aspects of integration in mind. Collaboration with content-specialist colleagues played an important role in this process, highlighting the importance of institutional support and collaboration for the successful implementation of CBLT.

Kong (2009) identified effective forms of CBLT instruction, including cyclical lesson structuring, use of content-related language, and support for student interaction. Pessoa et al. (2007) argue that a balanced focus on content and language can be achieved through conversational practices that support learners' use and development of language, including, for example, fostering metalinguistic awareness, providing opportunities for co-construction of forms, and teacher feedback. The above studies highlight the challenges teachers face in integrating content and language, the complex interplay between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices, and the importance of professional development and the provision of support in applying this method.

Case Context and Participant Background

The case study was conducted during April and May 2024 at an elementary school in the Czech Republic. The research was carried out in collaboration with one English teacher (a novice teacher with two years of teaching experience) in a Grade 7 EFL class consisting of eight students, whose proficiency levels ranged from A2 to B1 on the CEFR scale.

An initial preparatory meeting with the teacher was held prior to the implementation phase. This meeting served to gather contextual information about the class, including established routines, textbooks and materials in use, and methods of assessment. It also allowed for the collaborative planning of a thematic unit based on the cross-curricular subject of media education, which was selected for its relevance and potential to engage learners while supporting the goals of CBLT.

Research Aim and Guiding Question

The study aimed to explore the practical realities of adopting CBLT by a teacher without prior experience in this method. The investigation was guided by the following research question: *What benefits and challenges does a novice EFL teacher reflect upon when implementing the CBLT approach?* To address this central question, the study also considered several related aspects, such as the process of material selection, language- and content-related goals, teacher's preferred activity types and instructional strategies.

Teacher Preparation for CBLT Implementation

The collaboration began with a teacher training workshop designed to introduce the theoretical underpinnings of CBLT. This session also included hands-on tasks to familiarize the teacher with the method's practical application, such as setting dual-focused language and content objectives for a thematic unit. Together, we outlined the learning goals for the five-week implementation, aligning them with the selected topic of media education. Through this collaborative process, the teacher gained experience in identifying and articulating content objectives alongside language objectives. This planning phase laid the groundwork for a CBLT-based thematic unit that integrated all four language skills through meaningful and cognitively challenging tasks.

Implementation Phase

The core content was derived from the cross-curricular subject of media education, with lesson topics focusing on identifying misinformation, fact-checking techniques and critical analysis of various media formats. In the Czech Republic, cross-curricular subjects are intended to be integrated across a variety of subjects, making English lessons an ideal context for this integration, as they naturally provide opportunities for discussing authentic media and fostering critical thinking in a foreign language.

To adhere to the key principles of CBLT, the thematic unit and individual lessons were built around clearly defined language and content objectives.

By the end of the unit, students will be able to:

- Use media-related vocabulary in both spoken and written context.
- Read and analyze short authentic news texts.

- Practice modal verbs and opinion expressions in discussion and writing.
- Engage actively in pair and group discussions.
- Write an opinion essay on a media-related topic.

Corresponding content goals were:

- Understand the concept of fake news and recognize its examples in media.
- Evaluate online sources based on given criteria (source, author, evidence, bias).
- Discuss the impact of the media on society.
- Express informed personal opinions about the media.

As regards materials and activities, authentic resources such as news articles, infographics, videos, and podcast excerpts were used by the teacher to provide learners with rich input and expose them to real-world language. To support both content and language learning, the teacher also created tailor-made worksheets, guided reading tasks, and discussion prompts to supplement the various authentic resources. The aim of using these supporting materials was to provide scaffolding and guide learners throughout the activities that were different from the traditional textbook-based exercises. Some examples of activities include evaluation of media sources based on given criteria, academic debate, role plays, and opinion essays. These were designed to allow students to synthesize the information they had learnt in both written and spoken forms, with the goal of consolidating their knowledge and using language with a clear purpose.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this exploratory case study were collected from three primary sources: classroom observations, the teacher's reflective journal (submitted in both written and audio-recorded formats), and two rounds of semi-structured interviews. The triangulation of data sources was employed to ensure credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings while capturing multiple perspectives on the implementation process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Classroom data were collected through observations of three lessons, using a structured observation protocol crafted to record the utilization of CBLT-specific principles (Appendix A). The protocol categories included lesson preparation and delivery (setting clear content and language goals, using authentic materials and meaningful activities, providing learners with comprehensible input), scaffolding strategies, interaction patterns, review and assessment.

Moreover, one of the lessons was video recorded and later examined in detail to add to the observation protocol records and contribute to the interpretation of the data. The teacher kept a reflective journal (Appendix B) during the five-week period, submitting entries in both written and audio-recorded formats. The audio format of the teacher's reflections was regarded as particularly effective, as it allowed for an immediate post-lesson reflection and proved to be less time-consuming. The analysis of these reflections offered rich insight into the evolving thinking of the teacher, challenges encountered, and decisions made in lesson planning and delivery. In addition, two semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the teacher's experience (Appendix C). The first took place midway through the implementation and served to review preliminary observations, discuss the recorded lesson, and explore the teacher's early impressions of the approach. The second interview was conducted after the conclusion of the unit and focused on the teacher's holistic

reflections, including perceived benefits and difficulties and their evolving pedagogical mindset regarding integrated content and language instruction.

In the final step, all data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, reviewing and refining themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the main research question. The aim of the analysis was to identify key themes that best characterize the teachers' experience with implementing CBLT, its benefits and challenges, and draw insights to inform future practice.

Results

The analysis revealed five key themes capturing the teacher's experience of implementing CBLT:

1. **Positive impact of integrating authentic content:** The teacher observed that using authentic materials such as articles, YouTube videos and podcasts within the selected topic of media education increased students' motivation and engagement. It was highlighted that selecting topics directly connected to learners' lives outside the school, such as the topic of Fake News, proved to be highly engaging. Compared to the traditional English textbook content, the teacher appreciated that learners could relate to these themes, acquire new information and skills while being exposed to real-life language and resources.
2. **The challenge of balancing the cognitive and linguistic demands of the content:** The teacher occasionally found it challenging to balance students' linguistic proficiency with the cognitive demands of the content. This difficulty stemmed from the use of authentic online materials intended for native speakers, which often contained unfamiliar vocabulary and complex grammatical structures, as well as tasks requiring higher-order thinking skills (e.g., identifying an author's intent in an article). Although most students managed to complete the tasks successfully, some struggled when lower language proficiency was paired with cognitively demanding activities. The teacher concluded that greater attention should be given to connecting ESL lesson content with knowledge students had acquired in other subjects, thus providing the necessary context to support learning in the CBLT-based lesson.
3. **Lesson planning and selection of appropriate content/materials:** Even though the teacher moved away from using the standard textbook and sought to find materials from other sources, they had no difficulty finding what they needed, as a wealth of resources was available online on relevant websites. The only issue was selecting materials that matched students' level of proficiency. In case the teacher found a resource that was suitable content-wise but linguistically more challenging, they compensated for this by providing thorough scaffolding and supplementary materials. As the teacher was already accustomed to working with resources beyond the textbook, planning and implementing CBLT lessons did not require significantly more time than usual.
4. **Effective teaching strategies and activities:** The teacher noted that some of the most effective ways of integrating language and content were through discussions, pair-work, the use of ICT tools, and working with authentic resources. Collaborative activities gave students opportunities to support one another and deepen their understanding through interacting with peers. For example, academic debates proved to be particularly effective, with students being actively engaged, expressing and defending their opinions, practicing their speaking skills, and critical thinking

simultaneously. The teacher also pointed out that combining formal and informal assessment, such as portfolios and written tasks in the form of brief self-reflections and essays, was an effective way for students to demonstrate their understanding of the content while offering a valuable and meaningful way to monitor progress.

5. **Teacher motivation and mindset transformation:** The initial workshop motivated the teacher to implement CBLT, and the insights gained transformed their approach to instruction. Integrating relevant content provided a clear instructional focus and prompted experimentation with new teaching strategies. Positive student feedback further reinforced the value of the approach, shifting the teacher's perspective and inspiring the systematic integration of content into lessons across different grade levels, even after the case study concluded.

Conclusion

This case study offers valuable insights into the early implementation of Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) from the perspective of a novice EFL teacher in a lower secondary classroom. While the study involved only one teacher, one group of learners, and a five-week implementation period, the findings provide valuable insights for both pedagogical practice and future research.

The results indicate that, with adequate preparation and support, CBLT can be implemented effectively even by teachers new to the approach. Besides noticing increased student engagement, the participating teacher described the experience as professionally enriching and pedagogically transformative, stating that it encouraged a more thoughtful and purposeful approach to lesson planning. Importantly, the teacher emphasized the need for training not only in the theoretical underpinnings of CBLT, but also in its practical applications, such as setting balanced language and content objectives, adapting authentic materials, and managing the cognitive demands of tasks. The teacher's decision to continue using CBLT even after the case study has been completed shows just how valuable and impactful they found it in their own practice.

The insights may inform larger-scale and longitudinal studies examining teachers' evolving experiences with CBLT and student learning outcomes across diverse contexts. By integrating meaningful, real-world content, CBLT can not only make the process of learning a language more engaging for the students but also invite teachers to reflect on the purpose and relevance of language education. While challenges remain, particularly in balancing cognitive complexity with linguistic accessibility, they can be addressed through scaffolded instruction, teacher agency, and ongoing reflective practice.

Ultimately, this study illustrates the transformative potential of CBLT when implemented thoughtfully. It is not simply a language teaching method, but a curricular model for designing intellectually stimulating and socially relevant learning experiences. As Martel (2021) reminds us:

If we want foreign languages to be as relevant, engaging, and significant as other school subjects, we must do something different. We must choose content that is thought-provoking.

CBLT, I believe, offers a compelling framework for realizing this vision.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Sample of the Lesson Observation Protocol

Teacher & School : M.; Labyrinth Brno		Observation Protocol				
Date: April 10						
Recognising Fake News; 7th grade; A2/B1 level						
	Highly Evident	Somewhat Evident			Not Evident	
	4	3	2	1	0	
Lesson Preparation & Delivery						
1. Content objectives clearly defined and reviewed with students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1. + 2.) Both content and language objectives have been clearly stated and discussed on the board (interactive panel) in the introduction of the lesson. Content goal: Recognizing fake news. Language goal: Learn the vocabulary connected to the topic. Identify types of texts.
2. Language objectives clearly defined and reviewed with students	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3. Content concepts appropriate for age and educational background of learners	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. Concepts to be learnt: C.R.A.P. method used to check the validity of a piece of news and determine whether its, not, fake news.
4. Supplementary materials used to a high degree, making content clear and comprehensible (e.g. visuals)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. Supplementary materials: Worksheet, screen-sharing on the panel,
5. Adaptation of content to appropriate level of proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	5. Adaptation: Materials used were highly authentic, and therefore cognitively challenging for some pupils.
6. Meaningful activities that integrate lesson concepts with language practice opportunities	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6. Meaningful activities: Reading comprehension with analysis of the purpose of text.
Comprehensible Input						
7. Key vocabulary emphasized (introduced, written, repeated, highlighted)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	7. Key vocabulary introduced in the preparation worksheet activity - introduced, written. However, when working individually, students needed to work with the vocabulary themselves - they either asked the teacher or used a translation.
8. Clear explanation of tasks	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	8. Comprehension-checking, individually helping each learner.
9. Variety of techniques used to make content concepts clear (e.g. modeling, visuals, hands-on activities, body language, demonstrations)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	9. Modeling, visuals, hand-on activities.
	Highly Evident	Somewhat Evident			Not Evident	
	4	3	2	1	0	
Strategies						
10. Scaffolding techniques consistently used assisting and supporting student understanding	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	10. Variety of scaffolding techniques used, constantly checking student understanding, providing meaning-making activities
11. Variety of questions and tasks that promote higher-order thinking skills	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	11. Lower- to higher-order thinking skills necessary: e.g. connecting keywords (simple task), analysing texts to assess purpose of the article, audience, author information etc. (connection to other subjects), perhaps too difficult for some pupils, would require more instruction or perhaps a model example using modified texts.
Interaction						
12. Frequent opportunities for interaction and discussion between teacher and students and among students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	12. Pair-work configuration, opportunities for peer-help - e.g. when answering worksheet questions, asking for help with translating vocabulary
13. Grouping configurations support objectives of the lesson	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Review & Assessment						
14. Review of key vocabulary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	14. Key vocabulary revised throughout the lesson
15. Review of key concepts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	15. Some of the concepts were perhaps too cognitively challenging, would require deeper focus
16. Regular feedback provided to learners on their output (e.g. language, content, work)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Appendix B

Description of the Teacher's Lived Experience of Implementing CBLT for the Reflective Journal (adapted from the protocol created by van Manen, 2003 and later adapted by Cammarata, 2010)

Task description:

The purpose of this short record to be written by you is to recall a selected episode of your experience of CBLT-based teaching. Choose one that is still vivid in your memory and try to describe it as specifically as possible. To this end, avoid rationalisations, causal explanations, generalisations or interpretations as far as possible. There is no limit to the length of the text. Here are some guidelines to follow in describing the particular learning experience you have chosen:

- Try to think of a specific event or situation in which you have used CBLT principles in your teaching. Try to recall a moment that has stayed vividly in your mind.
- Try to describe what you were thinking about, the mood, feelings, emotions you were experiencing. You can even try writing the text in the present tense, as this can help you create an even more vivid description.
- You can also discuss how you experienced the situation in your interaction with your pupils.

Appendix C

Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

A. Semi-structured interview (during implementation, based on description)

- Can you describe a specific case where you think you have successfully integrated content into language teaching? What was the topic and what activities did you use?
- Why did you choose this particular episode? Why do you consider it a key moment to share?
- Are there any anecdotes or stories that you could share with me that would best describe your CBI learning experience?
- What was it like for you to implement the CBLT method? Is this experience similar or different from others you have experienced in previous teaching practice? If so, how is it similar or different?
- Is there anything that would have helped you to implement in the coming weeks (e.g., support from a researcher, colleagues, help with creating materials...)

B. Interview at the end of the implementation

- Can you describe specific situations where you have successfully integrated content into language instruction and achieved positive results?
- What do you think are the challenges and opportunities of integrating CBLT into foreign language teaching?
- What criteria did you use to select the content on which CBLT instruction was based?
- From where did you draw materials for teaching?

- What specific advantages or disadvantages have you observed in relation to learner motivation when teaching using the CBLT method?
- Which types of activities do you think were most effective in integrating content and language?
- What strategies do you find most appropriate (e.g. group work, discussions, project-based learning...)?
- What advice would you give to other teachers in implementing the CBLT method in their own teaching?