

Content-Based Instruction In Communicative Language Teaching

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Abstract

Content-based instruction (CBI), in which the teaching is organized around the content (Brinton et al., 1989), exposes students to different aspects of a new language while learning content. CBI models and paradigms have had major contributions to language and content learning and are known as holistic approaches to foreign language education (Sariani et al., 2022; Stryker & Leaver, 1997). Although the pillars of Content-Based Instruction are deeply rooted in the principles of communicative language teaching, they apply form-focused instruction (FFI) in teaching certain features in the target language (Elgün-Gündüz, Akcan & Bayyurt, 2012). The current study investigates a language learning experience in adult education through some of the distinctive characteristics of CBI including teaching content through language criteria, integrating language skills, involving students actively in all phases of the learning process, choosing content relevant to students' lives, interests, academic goals, and selecting authentic texts and tasks reflecting the cultural values of the target language (Bula Villalobos, 2014). The participants of this study are prospective language teachers who are exposed to a foreign language in a graduate Applied Linguistics in Second Language Acquisition course. By utilizing foreign language instruction within the linguistics course, students experience the key elements of language (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, orthography) through an active learning environment, enhancing students' learning of linguistic features while also engaging them in the language-learning process. This study shares the structure and outline of the embedded language experience as it relates to the linguistic content of the course and engages participants in a discussion about possibilities and next steps to consider in teaching content in a foreign or second language. Data collection includes observations, reflective journals, and assignment artifacts. Data are analyzed using a grounded theory approach to understand the experiences of the participants in this course. Results of the study suggest that through language instruction (Parsi), the researchers aim to add a layer of discussion to a new chapter of CBI paradigms.

Keywords: *Content-Based Instruction; Language Instruction; Language Teaching*

INTRODUCTION

Content-Based Instruction

Content-based instruction as a common pedagogical approach in second and foreign language teaching has become more popular since the 1990s (Richard & Rodgers, 2001; Stoller, 2006). One of the basic needs for any language teaching is the traditional teaching of the four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Teaching language skills with a focus on the subject matter rather than the language per se is one of the capacities of Content-based instruction (Stryker & Leaver, 1997; Stoller, 2006). In content-based instruction, the teachers provide authentic reading materials rich in cultural values of the target language to let the students practice and respond not only orally but also in writing. In content-based language lessons, students will have access to the major elements of that subject. Content-driven language

teaching will activate cognitive learning and critical thinking that will develop Multicultural Improvement of Cognitive Abilities (MICA) in learners (Kessler & Quinn, 1987; Stroller, 2002).

Language Instruction Within the Content-Based Framework

Although content-based instruction is a familiar paradigm and an effective approach for language teaching, its form and format may vary in different academic areas based on the needs assessment of the target syllabi. In general, content-based instruction in its original definition refers to teaching any content in combination with the target language. In content-based instruction, content and language are not separate things but the goal is teaching the content with either direct or indirect exposure to the target language.

Teaching language through content can be more productive by adding projects or activities which make the language learning process more fun and engaging to achieve standard language learning goals. In the content-based class, the focus is on content, not language (Dupuy, 2000); thus, the goal is to provide content input in the target language. In content-based instruction, meaningful language-dependent activities will create a multidimensional learning platform for the students. Although content instruction will be linked to the student's prior knowledge, exposure to complex and challenging activities can provoke creativity and learning motivation. With content-based instruction, there can be more space for flexibility with student-centered activities.

The most common types of content-based instruction for foreign languages are adjunct/linked courses (AL), second language medium courses (SLM), sheltered subject matter instruction (SSM), and theme-based courses (TB) (Fakher, 2014). In AL courses, there are two instructors with two syllabi, with a single goal to teach content and language at the same time. The AL content-based instruction may become challenging if there is not balanced cooperation and coordination among the instructors and syllabi (Lonon-Blanton, 1992). In second language medium courses (SLM), the focus is on the main subject of the course, not the language skills and there are no standard practices for the language proficiency of students. In a sheltered subject matter instruction (SSM), the instructor is the content specialist teaching language learners in a 'sheltered' group as defined by Brinton, Snow & Wesche in 1989. In theme-based courses, as the most common CBI model, a language teacher would teach content. Foreign language instruction is usually designed based on theme-based models.

Content and Language-Integrated Learning (CLIL)

In content and language-integrated learning (CLIL), content will be learned along with a foreign language or an additional language (Coyle et al., 2010; Marsh, 2002; Mehisto et al., 2008). CLIL instruction can be successful when a subject-content instructor is proficient in the target foreign language, so it will be easier to include language objectives in the CLIL course design. Although CLIL is flexible with different approaches, languages, and contents, the balance between content and language skills should be considered (Coyle et al., 2009). Participants of the CLIL approach should be motivated, confident, and feedback-sensitive, and recognize their attitudes and beliefs to make the learning process productive (Dellar, 2011).

Applied Linguistics in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Applied linguistics has a significant role in understanding how foreign/additional languages are acquired and should be taught. The principles and pillars are the same in foreign language education with all manipulations of modern theories of psychology, linguistics, and sociolinguistics. With the consideration of various paradigms and diverse strategies, applied linguistics will drive more on the wheels of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography. Teaching applied linguistics relies on a battery of linguists, teachers, psycholinguists, and philosophers to get to that ideal outcome (McDonough, 2002).

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) deals with learning an additional language other than the first of any speakers. In SLA teaching and learning, both the processes and products should be designed and built on the pillars of linguistics such as phonology, syntactic, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, cognitive psychology, psycholinguistics, educational psychology, and many other aspects that form learners' linguistic system (VanPatten, 1999). These principles should be considered in building a course in a foreign language. The most common obstacle in the first phases of foreign language teaching will be a lack of skills in decoding the foreign language and its linguistic elements in visual, oral, written, and virtual contexts (Kramsch, 2003).

Teaching linguistics in a foreign language, like all other language studies, demands a direct focus on cultural elements when that foreign language is the extra language in multilingual and multicultural settings (Blyth, 1995; Kramsch, 2003). Some researchers recognize CBI and CLIL as the same approach in which teaching and learning the content matters through a second or foreign language (Cenoz, 2013; Coyle et al., 2010; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008); however, we follow the term CBI in this study.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach

In the Communicative Language Teaching approach, different from the traditional language learning approaches, the goal is focused more on the communicative aspects of language learning. Content-based instruction (CBI) and Task-based instruction (TBI) are two major methodologies of CLT (Richard & Rodgers, 2001). CBI focuses on the acquisition of language using content, while TBI applies real-world activities to let the learners understand and practice their language skills (Toro et al., 2019). In the CLT approach, the learners are provided with authentic materials that will improve their language skills faster than direct or grammar-translation methods. The CLT approach provides opportunities for teachers and students to seek new teaching and learning materials and based on language needs to merge with language communities faster (Dos Santos, 2020). Per the definition of CLT, CBI is indeed a major component of this language-teaching approach. While CLT may have some disadvantages for different areas and subjects, it is still one of the most common approaches to teach content in a second and foreign language. The CLT paradigm is known to be more student-centered, focusing on the learning process rather than the product, respecting the diversity of the learners and resources, and taking the language experience as a life-long process than a short-time practice for limited purposes (Jacobs et al., 2003). The learners will find their own autonomy in the CLT approach in which they get self-regulated (Vygotsky's 1978), self-disciplined, and know what strategies and skills will work better for their learning styles and self-assessments.

Major Components of Language

Teaching linguistics is not easy without teaching the components of the language. Phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography are the major components of language. Phonetics is the study of speech sounds, their physiological production, and their acoustic qualities. Phonetics and phonology having the shared 'phon' stem, both refer to the use of sound in a language. In general, phonetics is the actual production and perception of speech sounds, while phonology is about the systems of sounds applied in languages (Cushing et al., 2016). Morphology is the study of words with morphemes as the meaningful minimal units of words. Morphology is known to be the connection between meaning and form (Bybee, 1985). Syntax is the study of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences and as a major part of grammar represents a speaker's knowledge of sentences and their structures in a language (Chomsky, 1965). Pragmatics is the study of relations between language and context grammaticalized or encoded in the formation of languages (Levinson, 1983). Semantics as the study of meaning deals with the literal meaning of words individually and as a combination (Kearns, 2011). Orthography, the art of writing based on standard symbols, is defined as the connection between a language, its script, and its writing system (Scheerer, 1986). Language teachers and linguists have identified these basic components of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics as the most significant elements in teaching and learning language skills (Hoare et al., 2008); therefore, these five language components form the key linguistic themes of the current study.

Purpose of Study

This study aimed to explore the participants' conceptions of Content-based Instruction (CBI) in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. The study further investigated the students' feedback on the resources provided in CBI through the CLT approach. Based on the original goals of content-based instruction, in this study, the students learn four language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing through the content of applied linguistics including phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography. The research questions focused on the perceptions of the participants in learning the applied linguistics content in the Communicative Language Teaching approach, exploring the relationship between the identity of the participants and their learning outcome, and the effectiveness of teaching tools and strategies for the participants' learning styles. As mentioned earlier some scholars recognize CBI and CLIL as the same approach in which teaching and learning the content matters through a second or foreign language; however, we follow the term CBI in the current study.

Based on the purpose of the study in exploring CBI in CLT, the research examined the answers to the following questions: 1. The participants' perceptions of content-based instruction in the Communicative Language Teaching approach; 2. The role of demographics in learning the language through content in the CLT approach; and 3. The learning strategies and tools that the participants found the most useful.

Many scholars suggest that CBI is applicable for all content and language proficiency levels. This study fills in a gap in the existing literature and adds a new layer to the prevalent theories on teaching content in a foreign or second language. This study is significant as it explores CBI in a foreign language in higher education and examines the novel paradigms of teaching content in andragogy and its comparison to pedagogical approaches.

METHODS

Through a grounded theory, a triangulation paradigm was applied for the current study in which the data were collected by observations, course assignments, reflective journals, formative, and summative assessments (Allwright et al., 1991; Denzin, 2008; Watson-Gegeo, 1988).

The participants consisted of 60 graduate students with diverse nationalities of Americans (N=20), Asians (N=27), Spanish (N=5), and other nationalities (N=8) in a Master of Science (M.S.) and Master of Education (M.Ed.) program in a southeastern university in the United States. Most of the participants had minimum experience of learning a second or foreign language and some of them were in-service teachers in different subjects and grades seeking a TESOL certificate. Figure one shows the participants' distribution into groups.

The participants of the study as registered in an Applied linguistics course were supposed to learn the most important elements of linguistics in a foreign language to experience the same exposure the ESL students get in English language classrooms and subjects. The goal was to add a novel component to the course to expose participants to ten weeks of a language learning experience in a language not previously studied. The course instructor had the linguistics discourse and practice for the first two hours of each class session and then the last forty-five minutes of the same session was taught in a foreign language around the same linguistics topics of the lesson. The lessons were delivered in different modes and formats including lectures, traditional writing practices, discussion boards, online practices, videos, and oral activities. Various technological tools were applied to teach the content and language at the same time. There were several reflection activities during the semester where the students could reflect on their progress and feedback to increase the flexibility of the lesson plans. Recorded mini lessons with different activities were created for each major component of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography of the linguistics course. The students could watch the videos recorded for each module and do the activities on their own to practice each of these linguistics components in Parsi.

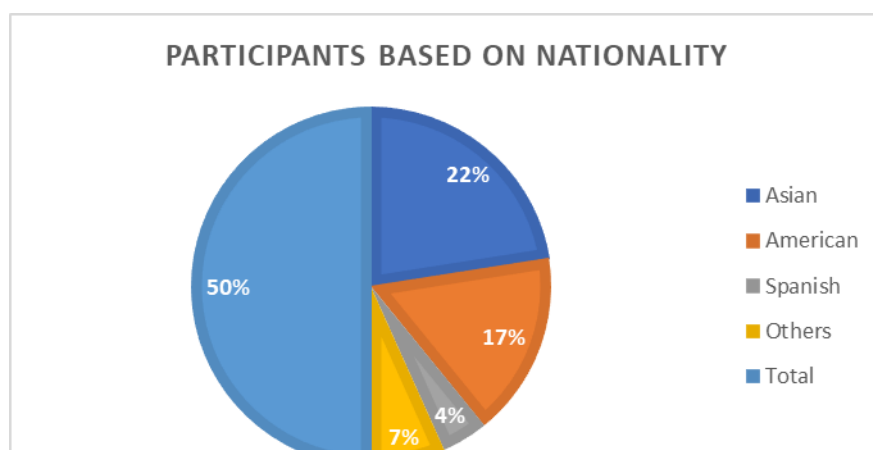


Figure 1. Participants' Nationality

FINDINGS

The results of the study indicated that the CBI in CLT approach provided students with an opportunity to identify themselves as language learners evaluating their mindset as language teachers. They practiced being more self-regulated and assessed themselves as language learners and teachers. The participants' perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of CBI in CLT are presented in Tables one and Two.

The participants' perceptions of content-based instruction in the Communicative Language Teaching approach

Positive Perceptions of CBI in CLT

As mentioned earlier the participants submitted several reflective journals during the semester including questions on the themes of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography of the linguistics course. The researchers coded the reflective journals based on these target linguistic codes and analyzed the students' perceptions of their content learning in a foreign language. The students with positive perceptions of this strategy expressed their satisfaction with learning each segment of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography as content in a foreign language in the CLT approach. Some selected excerpts of positive perceptions are presented in Table one.

Table 1

Selected Excerpts of Positive Perceptions of CBI in CLT

Themes	Example Quotes
Phonology	<p>“I find myself taking notes phonetically during our class time in hopes that it will help me practice it correctly throughout the week.”</p> <p>“Along those lines, I discovered the IPA symbols in language.”</p>
Morphology	<p>“I found that understanding vocabulary is the most important and useful thing for learning a new language.”</p>
Syntax	<p>“Once the word is committed to memory, then I move on to creating simple phrases of my own. When I am ready to create simple phrases, I try to increase my confidence by learning the syntax of the language.”</p>

Pragmatics	<p>“My Persian has been significantly improved through in-class learning in five weeks. I feel a sense of accomplishment in learning because of my study from zero to the greetings in daily life.”</p> <p>“I feel more confident in my ability with greetings. I have started practicing with my family.”</p>
Semantics	<p>“The strategy that I use in learning Parsi is practicing with natives. I also learned about Persian culture, and this is the strategy that I use to make meaning.”</p> <p>“She did not ask and force us to remember grammar rules. She encouraged us to open our mouths to speak. From this Persian learning, I strengthen my idea of combining grammar and communicative methods.”</p>
Orthography	<p>“I really appreciate it when she includes the written words ahead of time in our modules. Without seeing it in writing, I find my brain is wondering about sounds like b, v, or p because they are so similar...”</p> <p>“I’ve also tried to write the entire alphabet, now about 9 times while cross-referencing media sources to learn (re-learn) to read and write Parsi.”</p>

Negative perceptions of CBI in CLT

The reflective journals including questions on the themes of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography were analyzed once more to examine the negative reflections on teaching content in the CLT approach in a foreign language. The students with negative perceptions of this strategy expressed how they were overwhelmed, stressed out, demotivated, and disappointed to learn content in a foreign language in the CLT approach. They reflected on how they could understand their students better now when they expected them to learn content in English when English was their second or foreign language. Some selected excerpts of negative perceptions are presented in Table two.

Table 2

Selected Excerpts of Negative Perceptions of CBI in CLT

Themes	Example Quotes
Phonology	<p>“I often forget how to pronounce it correctly. I can only use translation software to query. This process is boring and not easy to stick to.”</p> <p>“After two weeks of study, I feel that the pronunciation of Persian is very different from English, and there are still some difficulties for me.”</p>
Morphology	<p>“I have learned that Parsi has free and bound morphemes like English, but I did not understand</p>

	<p>what the Parsi morphemes meant.”</p> <p>“You can teach me all day about Parsi morphemes, but if I have no idea what those morphemes mean in my language and do not have a visual cue of some sort, I am just confused and frustrated.”</p>
Syntax	<p>“I have difficulties concerning the grammar, the order of the words in a sentence and how to conjugate a verb.”</p> <p>“I faced challenges in understanding the syntax. Because of the lack of information, it is hard to identify relationships and roles of the words in a sentence...”</p>
Pragmatics	<p>“When we are taught at a fast pace with little to no English explanation in between is extremely discouraging...”</p> <p>“I have learned that some leniency when speaking their native language and English is needed for their comfort and mine.”</p>
Semantics	<p>“When the teacher only speak[s] Parsi in class I felt confused, I totally have no idea what she means and what she wants us to do. I only can guess she means from her body language, emotion, and eyes.”</p> <p>“If the target language is thrown at me in large chunks with no explanation or translation, it is easy for me to get overwhelmed and less motivated to learn”</p>
Orthography	<p>“Parsi is written from right to left. It results extremely confusing to me, at some point I even started reversing the letters...”</p> <p>“Writing is eluding me. The alphabets change when put into word forms, so I get tripped up easily in keeping track and what is what.”</p>

The role of demographics in learning the language through content in the CLT approach

Analyzing the reflective journals for the first research question revealed that some learners favored the CLT approach more than the other participants. The researchers analyzed the journals once more to delve into the participants’ demographics with decoded data. They removed names and labeled participants as domestic or international to investigate the role of ethnicity and background in their linguistic practice of the study. The participants’ demographics are presented in figure two.

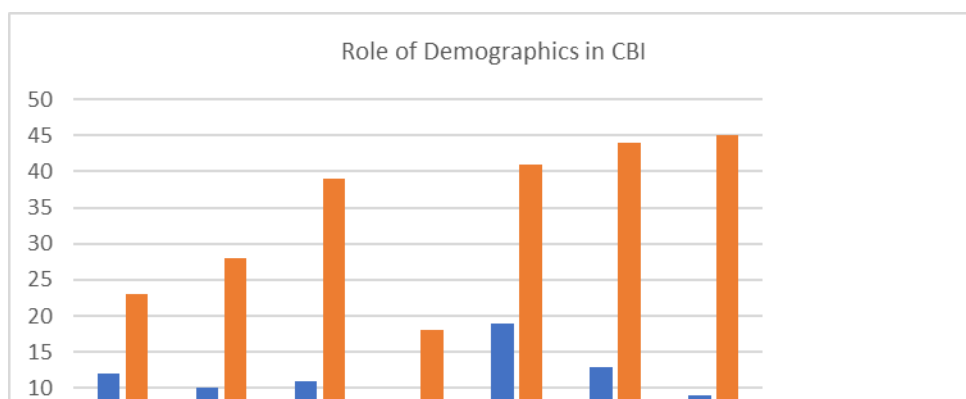


Figure 2. Role of Demographics in CBI

As presented in Figure two, the international participants of the study were more comfortable with the CLT approach applied in CBI. For some Asian participants, it was easier to stay motivated for each linguistic segment and stay on track with practices. Some Spanish-speaking participants found phonology and morphology simpler to learn than the other linguistic elements of the curriculum. The reasons may be varied and will need another research to investigate the reasons, but one obvious reason can be the international participants’ familiarity with learning English as a foreign language in their linguistic history. All the international participants of the study had experienced learning English as a foreign language before and that experience could elevate learning another foreign language with more flexibility toward the CLT approach. Although most of the domestic participants of the study had another language on their profiles, their second language learning could pertain to their school course or their interest in learning a foreign language through various methods and strategies. Domestic learners were never forced to learn a foreign language for their future studies or career and their language learning was further based on their interests. As mentioned above the significant difference between the perceptions of domestic and international learners of the study toward the CLT approach will demand another research and a thorough study.

Learning strategies and tools that the participants found the most useful

Several resources were applied to achieve the objectives of the course for both language and content instruction. The students were provided an Applied linguistic textbook for the English content of the course and a Persian language textbook. They had a workbook supplemented by the textbook but were asked to have notebooks and take notes during each class session as well as homework and language practices. The language instructor of the course was granted an opportunity to record language videos in a studio for each linguistic module of the course. The videos included vocabulary, pronunciation, and conversational practices that the students could watch on their own and practice the linguistic components of the course such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography. Each module had some language activities after the videos based on the linguistic features of that session. Students were supposed to do the activities and submit them on their canvas as an assignment that was evaluated by the language instructor for assessments and future revisions. The students were asked to write three reflective journals for each semester answering questions related to learning course content in a foreign language, teaching strategy, the teacher’s role, their progress, and the available resources. The writing journals reflected how the students found some resources more useful than the other ones that are presented in figure three.

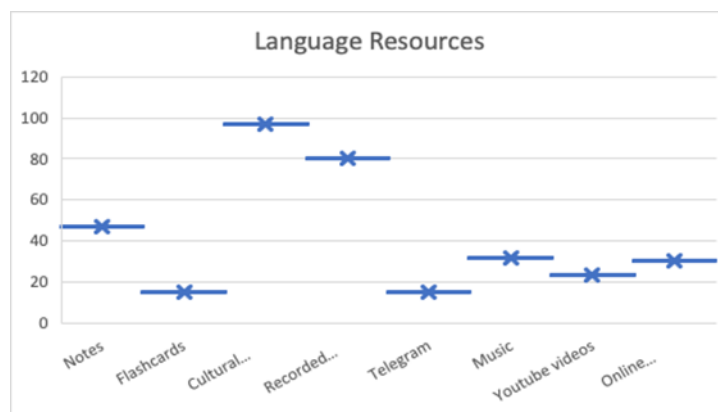


Figure 3. Language Resources

As presented in Figure three, and based on the students' reflections on resources, they expressed that the cultural activities and resources related to the target language were the most effective resources (97%). Most of the participants found the recorded videos very valuable in their practices and stated that they could practice phonology and morphology more easily by watching the videos (80%). Participants found the notes taken during the class or writing practices after class beneficial for their writing and orthography (47%). The participants also stated that online resources such as music (32%) and YouTube videos (23%) were effective in their listening and speaking practices. The students were asked to add a "Telegram" application on their phones to join a language practice group that many found useful for their writing and speaking practices (15%). Some participants found the flashcards effective with their learning styles (15%).

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it can be affirmed that applying different tools and techniques will facilitate the learning process and the learners will benefit from a variety of resources for different purposes and will benefit the ones that are aligned with their learning styles. Providing different strategies and tools will motivate students with different language levels and learning styles to achieve their learning objectives.

In the integration of the language and content, the placement of the language plays a significant role in providing the appropriate amount of input for the learners, and not all CBIs will end successfully if the conditions are not idyllic (Hoare et al., 2008; Lyster, 2007; Marsh et al., 2000; Yip & Tsang, 2007). The participants of the study were adults in the same course and program of study, but their language background was not the same, and offering an inappropriate amount of input could be a challenge. Many teachers believe that by teaching the content they will expose the students to the 'sink or swim' process that may naturally lead to language acquisition and gradual mastery over the language (Van Der Walt, 2013). This misconception in complicated subject courses may lead to missing both the language and content if the students are not in the precise level of language for that target content.

The other important consideration of CBI will be the duration of instruction and the amount of exposure to the target language. Many of the participants of the current study expressed that they needed more time for the goals of the language and content of the course. The curriculum should be designed considering the goals of the course for both the language and content (Doiz et al., 2014). Although the first principle of CBI is to focus on content rather than language, teaching complex content at the incorrect level of language proficiency in very short duration will demote the objectives of the course.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reflected the learners' perceptions of the teaching content in a foreign language in which some had positive perceptions, and some did not see CLT as the best approach for teaching content. The learners' positive perceptions of CBI are the reflection of previous studies in which the learners express that their language learning is more successful when the focus is on content and mastery of content helps their language proficiency (Edwards et al., 1984; Hoare et al., 2008; Valeo, 2013). Although scholars in applied linguistics and languages express that CBI is productive even from basic language levels (Stryker & Leaver, 1997), there are still researchers who believe that content-based instruction is more achievable in high-intermediate and advanced levels of language proficiency (Klee & Tedick, 1997). According to these scholars, teaching content in a foreign language at lower levels of language proficiency would create frustration, and not only the learners miss the content but will also cause a failure in the process of language learning that aligns with the findings of the current study. Although some learners were satisfied with learning the content and language in the CLT approach, some were overwhelmed, stressed out, and lost their confidence in learning both the language and content.

This study investigated the prospective teachers' perceptions of the content-based instruction in the Communicative Language Teaching approach. The participants of the study learned a foreign language through the content of an applied linguistics course including phonology, morphology, syntax, pragmatics, semantics, and orthography. The research questions delved into the perceptions of the participants in learning the language combined with content. The effectiveness of the CLT approach was examined based on the identity of the participants, their learning styles, as well as the efficacy of teaching tools.

The findings of the study reflect that designing curricula and practices based on the students' needs and perceptions can promote teaching methodologies. Although some participants of the study reflected a positive perception and progress in learning the content through the CLT approach, some other participants did not as the former studies confirmed. The findings of the current study align with some other studies in which the students in active instruction learned the content better but did not have as high perceptions as the students under passive instruction (Deslauriers et al., 2019). It can be concluded that CBI will not work for all learners if the objectives are not designed based on solid methodologies considering every student's learning needs.

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