The Role of Content in Cognitive Engagement
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In a previous article in C&TS Digital (Issue 2, 'Primary Language Learning and Thinking'), I suggested that a lot of language learning tasks emphasize mechanical and repetitive ways of working, and that there are considerable benefits from designing tasks which instead require more cognitive engagement. These benefits include an increase in learner motivation, deeper and longer lasting learning, and a role for language learning as a part of education. I also explained how we can assess the level of cognitive engagement that a language learning task implies if we think about three important aspects:

1. The distinction between 'learning content' (e.g. the language abilities the children gain from a task) and 'carrier content' (the topic, story, etc. that is used to 'carry' those language abilities).
2. The 'mental operation' required in order to complete the task. That is, whether it simply requires 'responding' (i.e. the learner mainly just repeats the content supplied) or whether it involves 'initiating' (i.e. the learner contributes their own ideas and own language knowledge).
3. The level of cognitive demand. Using Bloom's taxonomy, I suggested that we should try to involve children in higher order thinking ('creating', 'evaluating', 'analyzing') rather than just lower order thinking ('remembering', 'understanding' and 'applying').

In this article, I want to take these ideas further and set out ideas for how we can first think about the content of learning. In the next article, I will focus on the mental operation and cognitive demand that different types of tasks imply and how we can enhance that.

The importance of content

It is often suggested that one of the main problems for language teaching is that it is has no content of its own, or that the content which it does have is not very interesting for most learners (knowledge of grammar, functions, phonetics, etc). Certainly, we can see the implication of this way of thinking when we look at many language teaching materials, which often seem to jump from one random topic to another, often within the same activity! The purpose in this case is usually to give examples of the language, rather than actually say anything worth understanding. From the teacher's or materials writer's point of view, this might make sense, but from the point of view of a child who is interested in what the language says, this is often quite bewildering. It's not difficult to understand why so many children get so bored and simply switch off from language learning when they discover that what they are asked to read or listen to is frequently trivial or simply doesn't matter! That is, there is simply nothing to think about – nothing on which to engage their brains. Content matters, and 'rich content' – that is, content that is seen as significant and worth thinking about – matters even more.

Different types of content

In the previous article, I suggested that we should avoid using content which is simply a 'carrier', and instead aim to make all content 'learning content'. This is perhaps too strong, as we need to recognize that there is an imvportant role for content which is simply a carrier of new language abilities. In teaching primary children, this might be a story, a song, a puzzle, a joke and so on, which will be enjoyed in its own right. But we need to understand that the function of this type of content is mainly to do with the psychology of learning (e.g. making classroom work light, enjoyable and varied) rather than learning outcomes. At other times, carrier content can simply be a wasted opportunity. We can see this clearly if we take a common example. Imagine that the children are learning an aspect of grammar, such as the present simple. To do this, the teacher might ask them to listen to a text about '*what Peter does every morning when he gets up*'. In this case, we hope the children will remember the language they hear, but we fully expect them to forget all about *'Peter'*! Clearly, in this situation, we have lost an opportunity to teach the children the language *and* something worth learning which involves using that language. In the case of the present simple, for example, we might chose a topic such as why we have rain, how the moon causes tides, the life cycle of an animal, and so on. In this way, all the content – language and the ideas it expresses – is learning content.
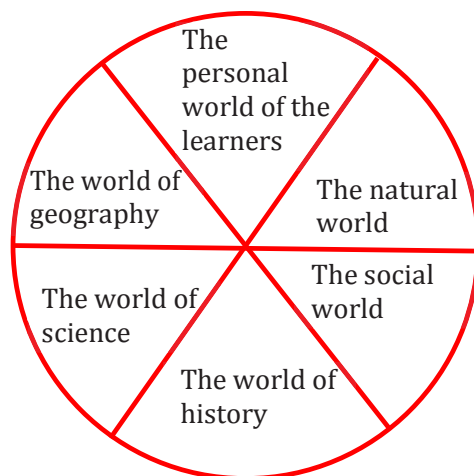
Coherence

An important consideration in applying this way of thinking, however, is that we also need to take account of another principle in learning, that is, *coherence*. It makes no sense to simply replace traditional carrier content with 'bits' of educational content. To take the example of teaching the present simple, if we have an exercise or a series of exercises that simply jumps from one unrelated topic to another (for example, from rain, to tides, to the life of a butterfly, etc.) then we are still treating the content as a carrier, not as learning content. Content for learning requires planning – it requires a syllabus which runs parallel to any language syllabus.

To do this, it is useful to think of designing tasks as 'a scheme of work', or a module, which relates to a common theme or topic. This topic area needs to be chosen for its educational value. A good way to judge this is to ask yourself *if the children already knew the language involved, would they still benefit educationally from this scheme of work?* In the case of *'what Peter does every morning'* the answer is probably 'no'; in the case of a sequence of work on why we have rain, the answer is more likely to be 'yes'.

Planning the content

In many places around the world now, language teachers work in teams with subject teachers, perhaps in bilingual education programmes or in CLIL courses. Such approaches have the benefit of ensuring coherence through a focus on a particular topic. Most language teachers, however, particularly those working with primary school aged children, still work alone in their classroom. In these situations, teachers will need to make choices about using alternative content and to undertake research into different possible topic areas. One way to approach this is to think of using content from different areas of the school curriculum, in much the same way as CLIL attempts to do. In my work on one of the first CLIL-type courses ever produced (*Cambridge English for Schools,* CUP), we used a basic framework to select, in turn, a focus that best matched aspects of the language syllabus to be taught.

Within each 'world', a useful place to look for guidance in selecting appropriate learning content is the curriculum plan or course books from mainstream schools, particularly plans for the age range of the learners concerned. A selected topic area can then became the predominant theme over a series of lessons or weeks, such that the learners are learning language abilities *and* educational content and abilities *at the same time*. In this way, for example, the children might be learning about how the continents were formed (world of science/geography) whilst at the same time meeting the passive voice or using adverbs or comparative forms, and so on. Providing this kind of overarching theme for a series of lessons has the additional benefit of making learning more memorable. The coherence which a theme provides makes it easier for the children to remember what they have been doing - and with it, the language that they have learned. In my own research, I have been struck by how often children simply cannot remember what they have been doing in their language lessons, often just describing classroom work as consisting of 'doing exercises' (see the article on motivation, available on my website). An educational theme provides something to think *about* – and a context to remember. '*What Peter does every morning*', on the other hand, is instantly forgettable!

A diagram of a circle divided into six segments, labelled: The personal world of the learners; The natural world; The social world; The world of history; The world of science; The world of geography.

An example

If we think this way, then it means that in planning classroom work we need to develop two sets of aims which run in parallel: *language aims* and *curriculum aims*. The example below shows the aims for an extract from the start of a scheme of work which focuses on *food*, with a sub-topic of *food and health*.

Curriculum aims	Language aims
• Children learn about the importance of eating a lot of some types of food and avoiding other foods. • They learn about "the food pyramid" and nutrition.	• Names of foods (vegetables, fruits, cereals, etc.) • Describing location: *at the bottom / at the top / in the middle* • Simple sentences: *There is some bread. There are some sweets.* *I eat a lot of… I eat…*

(Littlejohn and Schofield, 2003)

Curriculum aims, of course, not only include *what* the children will learn about, but also what educational abilities they can develop. This relates to *how* they will work with the content they are given. For example, to extend the work on the food pyramid, the children could be asked to *classify* different foods, or to *analyse* an example diet, or to *create* a healthy menu for a day, and so on. This is the other aspect of cognitive engagement that we need to plan when we choose a topic area. Bloom's taxonomy can certainly help us with this, something which I will discuss in my next article.

References

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