

Content-based Instruction and its Application to the Arabic Language Classroom

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Introduction

What would it take for students learning Arabic in Islamic schools to start using the language to talk about real-life materials and real-life issues, rather than to simply produce language forms that are grammatically correct? In other words, how can Arabic programs shift from their current focus on language forms to creating a balance between language and content? The answer may lie in the ability and willingness of the teachers of Arabic to move from language-driven instruction to content-based instruction (CBI).

What is Content Based Instruction?

The content-based approach to language teaching shifts the focus of instruction from the learning of language per se to the learning of language through the study of subject matter, such as Islamic studies, social studies, science, etc. The use of content-based instruction implies that the teacher of Arabic will need to create a balance between language and content. Under this approach, learning Arabic is no longer limited to gaining grammatical and linguistic competence (however important this type of competence is), but also includes the ability to gain content knowledge in different subjects.

Going Beyond the Arabic Textbook

Under the content-based approach to language teaching, the teacher is no longer limited to the assigned textbook. Instead he/she will need to look for appropriate and authentic material (such as texts, videotapes, audio recordings, websites and other visual aids) in order to supplement the textbook and/or introduce concepts and skills in other subject areas, such as social studies, Islamic studies, math, arts, physical education, and science. Arabic is no longer taught in isolation from any substance and context (simply to memorize vocabulary words and master grammar rules), and the Arabic class starts to create new dynamics in the overall curriculum of the school.

Benefits of content-based instruction for the Arabic classroom

The CBI approach to language teaching and learning has multiple benefits for the students learning Arabic as well as for overall school curriculum where Arabic is taught. Some of these benefits have to do with:

- Helping students to reinforce certain concepts deemed important in other content areas
- Allowing students to learn new concepts that may arouse their curiosity
- Enriching students' vocabulary stock with words that are relevant to their everyday life
- Showing students the benefits and applicability of learning Arabic to their everyday life
- Improving students' motivation to learn Arabic
- Promoting cooperation and coordination among teachers of Arabic and content specialists.
- Promoting curriculum integration
- Addressing parents' concerns about the lack of students' ability to use Arabic outside of the classroom in meaningful ways.

Which Subjects to Select for the CBI?

If the assigned Arabic textbook happens to be thematically-based (e.g., includes units about animals, health, environment, Eid celebration, etc.), then the teacher of Arabic may find it easy to pursue a content-based approach to the teaching of Arabic. Thus, he or she may expand on these units by supplementing them with authentic, updated material to enrich their content. At the same time, it is important for the Arabic teacher to concentrate on the topics from the textbook with which the students are already familiar (i.e., they have the content and cultural background knowledge). Familiarity with the content (due to the fact that they had already encountered the material in other subjects such as Islamic studies, social studies, science, etc) frees the students to cope with unknown linguistic forms (new vocabulary and grammar in Arabic) and not to worry too much about the substance.

Topics with which both the students and the teacher may be familiar include:

- Islamic Studies: holidays, Islamic history, Ramadan, Hajj, good manners, etc.
- Social studies: neighborhoods, family, friendship, the environment, geography, etc.
- Science: health, animals, food, plants, etc.
- Math: numbers, days, months, dates, etc.

Familiarity with such topics makes it easy for the teacher to select appropriate authentic material and design instructional activities to achieve the content and language objectives. At the same time, familiarity with these topics creates an appropriate context for the students to easily learn new linguistic forms in Arabic (new words and grammar structures). This means that information which had already been learned in (English) is "recycled" in Arabic both to reinforce its mastery and to learn new vocabulary, grammatical forms in an authentic fashion and a meaningful context.

What's expected of the Arabic Teacher?

The use of CBI in the Arabic classroom requires that the teacher of Arabic should devote some time and effort before the beginning of the school and during the school year to:

- Select and design units of instruction in light of the overall school curriculum and taking into consideration the age and level of his/her students
- Select and/or design supplementary material to enrich the units of instruction
- Communicate with the content specialists to determine what and how much learning took place in those units/topics that he/she wants to teach
- Evaluate student mastery of the content as well as the language forms as needed

While the extra time needed for planning may be viewed by some teachers of Arabic as a burden that is added to his/her already busy schedule, it should be remembered that the benefits of the CBI approach for the students and the Arabic program as a whole will far outweigh the extra time and efforts that are associated with the CBI implementation. After all, nothing is more rewarding for an Arabic language teacher than to see his or her students become able to use Arabic in a variety of contexts upon the completion of several instructional units, for example. Perhaps what is more burdensome for most teachers of Arabic is to see their students – after years of instruction and hard work – unable to go beyond the superficial use of the language at best, or worse, unable to use Arabic to perform any communicative function at all.

Conclusion

Years of research have shown that the content-based approach to language teaching is more effective in producing proficient language learners than the language-based approach. Unlike the language-

driven instruction which focuses on form, the CIB tries to strike a balance between form and substance by integrating language and content. Arabic teaching at all levels of instruction (K-16) can benefit substantially from the CBI approach. The introduction of the CBI to the Arabic classroom, however, will require the preparation of teachers who are willing and capable to move from the language-based approach, with which they may be more familiar and more comfortable, to the content-based approach, with which they may be less familiar and less comfortable.

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