

Evaluating the Significance of the UAE 12th Grade Language Instructional Material in Motivating Students to Achieve the Intended Goals Based on the Content-Based Approach

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the current UAE 12th grade language material in terms of its compatibility with the adopted approach and suitability for students' educational and cognitive levels in order to ascertain whether the present material motivates students to learn or not. The results of the current studies show that the current material is well-designed using the content-based approach to enhance students' learning of the four basic language skills, highlighting some benefits to sustain and some drawbacks to improve, along with some useful recommendations for future research.

Keywords: content-based approach, theme-based model, CALP, BICS.

1. Introduction

1.1 General background

The higher institutions and decision makers of the educational process have recently realized the importance of instructional materials in achieving effective learning as it helps teachers focus on the intended goals and objectives as well as directing students' learning towards achieving such goals and objectives. Therefore, researchers started to think of ways to make instructional materials as effective as possible, and one of which, according to Gagné (2007), was to evaluate them in terms of the strong and weak points and work on sustaining the strong points and improving the weak points when possible to maximize students' benefit from such instructional materials leading to achieving the intended goals and objectives.

In the context of L2 learning, Richards & Rodgers (2015) referred to some approaches to make language instructional materials as effective as possible. However, it was argued by Graves (2007), Dubin & Olshtain (2002) and Nunan (2000) that language instructional materials should also be evaluated to make sure that the investigated language material is well-designed, well-structured and very informative in a way allowing for both language teachers and students to convey the written content to classroom interactions leading to achieving the intended goals and objectives.

By looking deep into our language instructional material, we found that the content is designed and organized around some topics and thematic units of study. This gave an indication that the designers of the current material adopted the content-based approach, an approach to textbook/ syllabus design as defined by Larsen-Freeman & Anderson (2015) and Richards & Rodgers (2015) to make the current material as effective as possible. Therefore, the researcher of this research, in his way to evaluate the current language instructional material, has decided to be more specific by evaluating the present material's compatibility with the content-based approach (hereinafter referred as the CBA), its suitability for students of the current age and educational level and its efficiency in both structure and design.

1.2 Characteristics of CBA materials

The CBA is considered one of main and effective approaches to syllabus design as presented in many pioneering works (e.g., Stryker & Leaver 1997; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson 2015; Richards & Rodgers 2015). It is the product of gradual development of syllabus design from learning the target language through some linguistic instructions to learning the target language through the study of content (Richards 2017). Students, through the CBA, acquire the second language by studying a series of different topics in a very systematic and organized way and from different angles (Nunan 2001). The activities of CBA, according to Stoller (2002), should be authentic and specific to the topics being taught. He continues to say that they should also trigger students to think and learn through the exposure to some academic texts and linguistic skills and particularly the productive linguistic skills.

Haley & Austin (2014) add to this by saying that this approach integrates both language and content in a textbook, resulting in students' development of communicative and cognitive skills as well as students' attainment of academic language proficiency. They also conclude that the integration of both content and language leads by default to three main models representing a continuum; (1) the shelter model, in which the content is learnt through the meaning of the target language; namely, the language is used as a medium to understand and learn the content, (2) the theme-based model, in which the language is learnt through the meaning of the content; namely, the content is used as a medium to understand and learn the language, (3) the

adjunct model, in which both language and content are equally emphasized. They continue to say that there are no further remarkable features distinguishing one model from the other two models, and it is the decision of educational institutions to choose their preferable model.

1.3 Rationale aim, scope and research questions

Literature showed a scarcity of research in evaluating the current language instructional material with regard to its effectiveness in motivating students to learn the target language and achieving the intended goals and objectives. In particular, no research was carried out to evaluate the present language instructional material in terms of its compatibility with the adopted approach, the content-based approach, and its suitability for students' educational and knowledge level.

Hence, the researcher, by conducting this research, aims at exploring the significance of the current investigated language instructional material in motivating students to learn the target language by identifying its efficiency in terms of structure and design on the one hand and its compatibility with the adopted approach and suitability for students' educational and knowledge levels on the other hand. To make the research more focused, the researcher assesses the first two units of the instructional material in order to reach tangible and conclusive evidence about the significance of this material with regard to the above issues, a matter which may result in some useful and invaluable recommendations with respect to any future potential development of the current material.

Accordingly, the researcher of this research brings for investigation the following two questions:

- Do the investigated material's layout, topics, objectives and design motivate students to learn the target language?
- Is the investigated material compatible with the approach adopted by the designers and suitable for students' current knowledge and educational levels?

2. Literature review

2.1 Nature of language and language learning

Many types of language syllabi are introduced by researchers as a result of the state of long argument among them over the nature of language and language learning. The following lines provide a critical review of the literature with regard to the different types of language syllabi in order to get a better understanding of the location of the CBA among other approaches and to fully grasp its views towards language and language learning.

The language syllabi are divided into two groups by Wilkins (1985); the analytic syllabi group and the synthetic syllabi group. The analytic syllabi group includes the notional syllabus, the functional syllabus and the situational syllabus, and those types of syllabi should be designed in accordance with students' needs of the target language. Wilkins continues to say that students should be exposed to the taught language in the form of chunks, and language teachers should consider the communicative purpose as a starting point to learn the target language. Moreover, Wilkins emphasizes that the content of this group should vary to include academic subjects, situations, themes or topics. The second group of syllabi, according to Wilkins, is the synthetic syllabi in which the target language should be divided into small parts, and students, in their way to acquire the target language, should be exposed to it in a very little amount. According to him, the language is a set of rules, and these rules should be gradually studied from the more general to the more specific ones. For example, students, in order to understand and acquire the target language, should be exposed to the general grammatical structures before the more complex ones.

Meanwhile, the language syllabi are divided by White (2005) into two different groups; the group (A) and the group (B). The starting point for the former group (group A) is the question about what students should learn. White also stands for this group as an interventionist approach in which syllabi designers intervene to make pre-determined or preconceived language or skill objectives that teachers should focus on to enhance students' learning of the target language. The starting point for the group (B), on the other hand, should be the question about how students learn the target language. This group is referred to by White as a non-interventionist approach in which no objectives are pre-selected, and students, in order to acquire the target language, should be exposed to naturally authentic and communicative tasks.

With the emergence of some new ideas and concepts about how language is acquired or learnt, new approaches to language syllabi are developed by Nunan (2007). He divides the language syllabi into two new groups; the product syllabi group and the process syllabi group. The product syllabi group, according to him, focuses heavily on the new skills, concepts or knowledge that students should attain by the end of the instructional lesson. He goes on to say that this group of syllabi, also called the traditional syllabi, encompasses three sub-syllabi: the situational syllabus, the functional-notional syllabus and the structural syllabus. According to Melrose (2015), the language in the structural syllabus is taught through some certain forms, while in the situational syllabus the language is taught through some real-life situations in natural settings, and in the

functional-notional syllabus the language is taught through an integration of both situational and structural components along with the communicative aspects of the target language.

The other group of syllabi, the process syllabi group, emerges as a reaction to the product syllabi group which is criticized by Melrose (2015) and others for relying heavily on pre-selected scripts instead of using natural scripts. According to Nunan (2007), the language in the process syllabi is taught through a process by which students attain new skills, concepts and knowledge about the taught language. He goes on to say that this group of syllabi encompasses three sub-syllabi: the task-based syllabus, the procedural syllabus and the content-based syllabus. The task-based syllabus is structured around a series of communicative tasks conducted by students, while the procedural syllabus focuses on the knowledge exercised in performing a task, and the content-based syllabus, which is the subject matter of this research, focuses on the integration of both language and content in a textbook to develop students' both communicative and cognitive skills.

2.2 Conceptual framework of the study

Snow, Met & Genesee (1989) propose three main sources to be included in any content-based textbook or program to achieve language learning objectives: (1) the content-area source, (2) the target language source, and (3) some activities to assess students' communicative and academic needs as well as some other activities to constantly assess students' development of the four basic language skills. They also specify the types of language objectives that can be achieved through content-based textbooks or programs by dividing them into two types: content-compatible language objectives and content-obligatory language objectives. The content-compatible language objectives can be achieved by studying the content of the target language and assessing students' progress and needs, while the content-obligatory language objectives can be achieved by students being exposed to the linguistic features required to convey the information in the content area. According to them, the result is that various components of the target language are addressed including language structures (grammar), language functions (communicative and academic functions) in addition to some useful language chunks.

2.3 Theoretical framework of the CBA

2.3.1 Input theory of language acquisition

The Krashen's comprehensible input theory is the first theory to discuss the integration of both language and content in a textbook or a syllabus. According to this theory, students, in their way to acquire the target language, should be exposed to meaningful and understandable input, and this input should be little beyond students' current level of knowledge. Moreover, it assumes that students' success in acquiring the target language relies heavily on creating the same environment and conditions as created for acquiring the first language. It emphasizes that it is the language meaning that should be addressed not the language structure. Furthermore, Krashen in this theory believes that the language structure should not be given special attention as it will be attained automatically when students are exposed to comprehensible input.

2.3.2 Social constructivism and language theory

The social constructivism theory as first revised by Vygotsky is an expansion of the comprehensible input theory in which the input, that is authentic and slightly beyond students' current level of knowledge, should be socially shaped and culturally framed in order for students to be able to construct some new concepts about the target language (Slavin 2009). According to this theory, the content should motivate students to learn by providing authentic topics or themes and should also encourage them to interact and work in pairs or groups through interactive activities. The result is that students are able to connect the new concepts about the language and the content being taught with the existing ones leading to better representation of the new concepts in students' mind (Slavin 2009).

2.4 Some issues connected with the CBA

Firstly, the comprehensible input theory by Krashen is called into question by many critics such as Sheen (1994) and Harley (1990) who claim that, although this theory solves the fluency-related issues of the target language, it keeps the accuracy-related issues unsolved. To solve the accuracy-related issues, CBA materials may have to be developed to encompass some form-focused as well as meaning-focused instructions and activities to foster students' acquisition of the target language in terms of both fluency and accuracy.

Secondly, the two-tiered skills model as developed by Cummins (1979) is deemed another issue. According to this model, there are two different types of language skills: the cognitive academic language proficiency skills (CALP) and the basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS). According to Cummins, the CALP is much more difficult to learn than the BICS, as it takes five years a minimum to master the CALP while it takes two years a minimum to master the BICS. Therefore, it is not appropriate to integrate both language and content into an instructional material to enhance language learning. To solve this issue, it would be beneficial for students to master the advanced academic language before learning the content instruction.

Lastly, using the first language in instructional materials to promote second language learning is another

issue. The idea of using both first and target languages while teaching the target language in the classroom context is recommended by Ovando & Combs (2017) among others to help students grasp the content. However, designing an instructional material with these specifications remains a major challenge to be addressed by schoolbook designers.

3. Teaching context

3.1 Materials, schools and students

The instructional material under investigation is approved by the UAE Ministry of Education to be taught across the UAE governmental 12th grade classes. This instructional material is particularly scanned and photocopied from a female student in a governmental secondary school named “Al Ibdaa Secondary School for Girls” and located in Sharjah Emirates. This school is accredited with the UAE Ministry of Education to offer a full time education and provide different academic services including teaching English as a foreign/ second language. Besides, this school among all other governmental secondary schools across the UAE adopts the CBA as an approach to textbook design to enhance students’ learning of the English language as a second language. From its profile, the school enhances cooperative learning through teacher-student and student-student interactions and empowers working in peers or groups to develop students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Finally, our investigated language instructional material is attached as a separate document for both internal and external examiners’ records.

3.2 Material’s specific details, goals and objectives

The current instructional material is collected from the 12th graders’ course book, “*Bridge to Success*”, Pugliese, Curtis, Malki & Laird (2017), term one material. The first term material consists of three units equally distributed over the whole term. The researcher of this paper focuses in his research on the first two units whose titles are: “Calling Planet Earth” and “Fitness for Life”. The main purpose of our instructional material is to develop students’ skills in the four basic skills of the English language; the reading, the writing, the speaking and the listening skills. Each unit includes a range of activities, text types and specific objectives which specifically developed for the young students throughout the UAE. All these specific objectives reflect the UAE context by relating all themes, topics and situations to the Emirati context. They also aim at empowering students to discover the wider world and motivating them to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills by providing authentic topics, themes and situations challenging students’ current knowledge levels. Moreover, they aim at meeting students’ future challenges by developing both academic and conversational English.

4. Material’s analysis, evaluation and discussion

The reason behind evaluating any instructional material is to measure its compatibility with and suitability for the general aim and specific objectives as set by decision makers of the educational process (McDonough & Shaw 2012). They continue to say that this evaluation process enables researchers to identify any incompatibility, unsuitability or shortcoming in the investigated material and then give recommendations for some certain modifications or adaptations to suit the intended aim and objectives, and this is exactly what the researcher of this paper would like to do throughout this section. Moreover, and for effective execution of the evaluation process, McGrath (2016) suggests using checklists carefully designed to help researchers concentrate on research aims and objectives. The checklist of this paper, as annexed in the appendix (1) to this paper, is a set of questions fully designed and developed by the researcher of this paper to help him focus on the current research aims and objectives.

4.1 Material’s layout

The general layout of the investigated material is very attractive for students’ eyes as the designers use different colors and insert lots of pictures to attract students’ attention to the content of the material. In addition, the font size of the investigated material is large enough to enable students to easily and clearly read the content, except for the reading texts whose font size is relatively small. Moreover, the font shades and colors are used extensively to attract students’ attention to the most significant information in the content. Furthermore, the modern technology in the form of CDs is used to develop the English listening skill. This all conforms to the CBA in which the target language can easily be learnt or acquired if the content is very appealing, and students do not have much difficulty reading and understanding the content.

However, the use of modern technology in the investigated material is confined to teaching the listening skill while it can also be used to develop the other three main language skills as appeared in Stoller’s work (2002). In addition, the internet accessibility is not highlighted in the material as an effective tool or way by Stoller (2002) to expand students’ perception and widen their horizons towards knowledge by getting access to a huge amount of information. Finally, Stoller (2002) finds it important to make the texts readable by adjusting the font size of reading texts.

4.2 Material's topics

The topics of any instructional material, according to the CBA theory of language learning, should be authentic and connected to real life situations and, at the same time, should meet students' needs to attract and motivate them to learn the content. The topics should also suit students' cognitive levels and abilities. Moreover, the CBA insists that students should either have a previous background about the taught topics in order to first assimilate the new information in the new topics with the existing ones, then accommodate the new information in students' mind, or have ample experience with regard to the topics being taught to enable them constructing new ideas or concepts about the new information provided in the new topics.

By relating our instructional material to the above ideas about the CBA, we find that the topics of the first two units under investigation are very authentic and strongly connected to our real life, as the topics focus specifically on the following: space exploration and cosmic features of our planet, animals and wildlife, plants and trees, health and wellness, food and health, medicine and health, technology and fitness and finally health issues in the UAE. Therefore, we can say that all these topics are compatible with the CBA approach, and they can trigger students and motivate them to know more about the content of these topics. Additionally, and as 12th graders, the students have previous knowledge about the above topics, a matter which enables them assimilating, accommodating and constructing some new information and ideas about the taught topics as mentioned in Slavin's work (2009).

Moreover, and according to the Piaget's theory of cognitive development which maintains that students at the formal operational stage (11 to 15 years old) are able to think abstractly, reason logically and deal with or accept hypothetical and potential situations that are not known to exist, we can say that our instructional material's topics are suitable for students' cognitive level. However, the Piaget's theory is challenged by Niaz (1997) among others that many individuals never reach this stage of formal operations. This means that many students may not be able to reason the topics in the first unit as they talk about conditions never experienced by the current students resulting in inappropriateness of the topics for them.

4.3 Material's objectives

In congruence with the theme-based model of the CBA, the content of the investigated material is used as a medium to reach the intended general aim represented in developing the four basic skills of the English language. This appears clearly in the equal distribution of the material's activities to the four language skills, and this procedure meets students' needs in acquiring the four language skills. Although this procedure, as taken by the designers of this material, goes beyond the limitations of the CBA which, generally, pays heed to language meaning not language form, it fails to concentrate more on the speaking and writing skills as fundamental to acquire the target language according to the CBA.

To achieve the intended specific objectives of the current instructional material, and in agreement with the CBA in terms of the authenticity of texts and activities and the suitability of content for students' cognitive and educational level, a good number of authentic texts and activities challenging the current students' cognitive levels are provided in the investigated material to firstly develop both word-analysis and sentence-analysis skills of the students and to make them able to discover the word meaning and the structure function from the texts and activities provided, and secondly to improve students' rich production of the target language and full understanding of the spoken talk by describing different events and expressing different ideas and opinions on the one hand and by listening to different academic topics on the other hand.

4.4 Material's design

The current instructional material is designed in a way allowing for the target language to be studied and learnt through the content by the exposure to a great deal of written, oral, audio and reading activities; namely, the content is used as a vehicle to learn the four language skills, and it is also designed to be taught by specialists in the target language. This means that our instructional material is designed using one of the three CBA models, which is the theme-based model as categorized by Haley & Austin (2014). The current material's design is also suitable for students' educational and knowledge level in agreement with the work of Krahne (1987) in which the CBA material can be designed for both primary and secondary school students.

However, we cannot say that our instructional material is typical of the theme-based model as it does not give priority to the communicative language in the form of written and oral activities. To explain this, each unit roughly contains twenty activities divided evenly over the four language skills with no much concentration on the speaking and writing activities as substantial to learn or acquire the target language. According to the CBA, the language meaning should be given the priority as the language form can be learnt or acquired spontaneously when the productive language skills are developed. Additionally, it is noticed from the material design that some of the activities are totally reliant on students' mental ability to accept and understand the hypothetical conditions and facts especially those designed in the first unit which may not be suitable for low-achievers or for those students with low cognitive abilities.

Moreover, the current material is designed in a way allowing for providing some linguistic simplifications, tips and strategies with the aim of simplifying the content on the one hand and enhancing students' improvement of the four basic language skills on the other hand as seen in separate boxes on the right side of the investigated instructional material. Furthermore, it is quite apparent from the material that the designers use a variety of questions in the activities starting from straight forward questions which seek simple and short answers and ending with more complex questions which seek richer production of the language and trigger students to think critically and broadly.

Nevertheless, the designers give less emphasis in the activities on social interactions through peer or group work as there is only one out of twenty activities in each unit which empowers group work, a total of two out of forty activities in our instructional material. The idea of social interaction or students' scaffolding in the CBA allows students to help each other understand the content and learn the language. The negligence of this concept or this idea by the designers of our material may lead to unsuitability of the material for low-achieving students as not all students in the class are always characterized as high-achievers.

Ultimately, it is vividly noticed that the group work activities are directed towards enhancing the speaking skill only in contradiction with the CBA in which students are high interactants and active players in all language activities. Indeed, the inexperienced teachers are the only interactants in classroom settings who benefit from adopting the traditional teaching strategies, in which teachers are the only active players and students' role is confined to receiving the information (McCafferty, Jacobs & Iddings 2006). By adopting the traditional teaching strategies rather than cooperative learning strategies in classrooms, inexperienced teachers will be able to maintain class order and take control over the time allocated for instructions (Orlich *et al.* 2013). In addition, and according to them, adopting the cooperative teaching strategies in the classroom challenges inexperienced teachers to deal with the divergent questions raised by students towards the general aim and specific objectives of any instructional material.

4.5 Summary of the results

4.5.1 Benefits of the investigated material

The following points briefly present the benefits of our instructional material:

- The material is attractively laid out and thematically organized around some authentic topics in a way allowing for students to easily remember the content and motivate them to achieve the intended goals and objectives.
- The material is considerably compatible with the theme-based model adopted by the designers of the current material and adequately suitable for students' educational and knowledge levels allowing for students to learn both the language and the content, resulting in achieving two goals at the same time represented in improving the basic linguistic skills and developing the cognitive skills as well.
- It focuses on teaching the four language skills in order to improve students' language fluency as well as accuracy.
- It enhances learning the target language in proper contexts leading to adequate and effective communication with others.
- It also motivates students to learn by selecting topics challenging students' critical thinking and taking into account what students need to learn.
- It helps inexperienced teachers to well-manage the class and take control over the time allocated for the instruction.

4.5.2 Drawbacks of the investigated material

The instructional material under investigation may have to be adjusted by future potential developers and designers taking into account the following points to maximize students' benefit from the current material:

- The instructional material's activities do not encourage peer or group work in contradiction with the modern language learning theories, in which students are fully involved in classroom interactions to develop all social, interpersonal and language skills.
- Neither is there much emphasis on the communicative language activities nor is it on the use of modern technology as substantial by the CBA to enhance effective language learning.
- The investigated instructional material fails to make a balance between high-achieving and low-achieving students or between those with advanced cognitive levels and low cognitive levels as it provides content, especially in the first unit, challenging students' cognitive development. However, this point is still a big challenge before designers and developers of any language instructional material because of the lack of the appropriate mechanism by which they can make or create such balance.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The instructional material is well-designed by the theme-based model, a type of the content-based approach, with

the focus on developing the four language skills. It integrates the content with an incorporated and contextualized combination of the four basic language skills through the exposure to an input in the form of audio, oral, written and reading activities that are little beyond students' current levels, but without giving much attention to the oral and written activities and to peer work activities as considered important to achieve effective language learning. In addition, it is suitable for students' knowledge and educational level but with paying little attention to the disparities in students' cognitive development and their proficiency language level.

Therefore, it would be recommended to adjust our instructional material to include much more oral and written activities to foster students' communicative skills. Moreover, the instructional material's activities may have to be adjusted to allow for cooperative learning through peer or group work activities as important by latest language learning theories to promote effective language learning. However, the adjustment should also consider the limited time available for the instruction. Finally, much more effort is needed by future potential designers to fill the gap between high-achieving and low-achieving students or between those with advanced cognitive development and those with low cognitive development.

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Appendices

Appendix (1): evaluation checklist

Aspect	Comments
The layout <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does the material use font shades, pictures and colors?• Are the material understandable and the font readable?• Does the material foster using the modern technologies including computer and internet to improve the four basic language skills?	
The topics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are the topics authentic and related to real life situations?• Do the topics meet students' needs and motivate them to learn both the content and the target language?• Are the topics suitable for students' educational levels and cognitive abilities?• To what extent do the topics link to students' life experience or their previous academic knowledge?	
The objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the material's general aims and specific objectives?• How is the content-based approach used to achieve the intended objectives?• Are the intended objectives suitable for students' educational and cognitive levels?• How is the material employed to achieve the intended objectives?	
The design <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is the material designed?• Does the design suit the content-based approach?• How many activities are designed in the instructional material and how are they utilized to achieve effective language learning?• How are the questions in the class activities designed to achieve effective language learning?• Does the design provide spaces for linguistic simplifications, tips and strategies?• Does the material's design trigger students' full interaction in the classroom activities? And how far?• What are the teaching strategies most suitable for our instructional material' design?	



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