

## The Integration of Virtual Learning Environments and Content-Based Instruction

Han Xiaohui, Fu Li

School of Foreign Languages, Harbin Institute of Technology (Republic of China)

[hanxiaohuihit@aliyun.com](mailto:hanxiaohuihit@aliyun.com)

### Abstract

*This paper describes how virtual learning environment (VLE) can be applied in content based instruction (CBI) for L2 learners. With the rapid development of technology, there is a gradual shift from the traditional classroom-based learning environment to the computer-based autonomous learning environment in the process of learning. There is also a shift in language teaching from the skills-training to CBI. VLE provides a good platform for the implementation of CBI. The combination of VLE and CBI will change the roles of both teachers and learners. For the teachers, they have to redefine their portfolio from that of a manager to that of a facilitator. For the learners, especially those who have fewer chances to live in the English-speaking countries, they will become autonomous and enjoy long-term benefits from this practice. Virtual learning environment supports communication, coordination of actions, and collaboration in learning activities between many different people at the same time [Chee, 2001]. It is important to realize the importance of the integration of the development of online learning and content-based approach. It is also important to determine the scope and type of functions employed and the type of instructions needed in VLE courses.*

**Keywords:** VLE; CBI; L2 learners; authentic context; autonomous learning

It is no doubt that the best way of learning a foreign language is to actually communicate with native speakers of the target language in a real world. However, native speakers for real world language learning, along with other things such as the time, money and etc. are not available for all language classrooms and language learners. Students generally learn the language from textbook explanations and examples in a skill-based approach. Fortunately, with the rapid development of technology and language learning theories, there is a gradual shift from the traditional classroom-based learning environment to the computer-based autonomous learning environment in the process of learning. There is also a shift in language teaching from the skills-training to CBI. The students may learn languages more interactively, not only the target language, but new ways of thinking and structuring information. Therefore the integration of VLE and CBI is the best approach in an EFL setting. The following part will discuss how VLE can be applied in CBI for L2 learners.

### Close link between VLE and CBI

Rheingold [1991] defines virtual reality as an experience in which a person is surrounded by a three-dimensional computer-generated representation, and is able to move around in the virtual world and see it from different angles, to reach into it, grab it, and reshape it. Language teacher can develop programs for realistic situational communication such as job interviews, banks, restaurants, or international airports. Students will interact with classmates in these settings and actively gather new information, and then process, reorganize, and internalize it. VLE can establish such authentic communicative situations in ideal ways and provide a platform for the realization of CBI.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) has been defined as "the teaching of content or information in the language being learned with little or no direct or explicit effort to teach the language itself separately from the content being taught" [Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 204]. According to Richards and Rodgers [2001], "language is purposeful" [p. 208]. When learners have purposes, which may be "academic, vocational, social, or recreational," and concentrate on them, they can be motivated depending on how much their interest can be in their purposes [p. 208].

VLE approach has changed language learning from drill-like exercises or an exclusive focus on grammatical accuracy to content-based activities and meaningful communication between students. Researchers in second language acquisition have long reminded language teachers that language acquisition is not a passive skill of recognition but a creative construction process. Take Krashen's "Monitor Model" for example: if students are given comprehensible input, it is less difficult to learn the target language, and as a result, they can acquire (verses. learn) it. Krashen [1982] emphasized ways



of decreasing learner anxiety, such as providing interesting texts as well as meaningful activities, which are comprehensible to learners. Through both VLE and CBI learners can “interact with authentic, contextualized, linguistically challenging materials in a communicative and academic context” [Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 4].

### **Authentic Communication and Content**

In virtual learning environment, it's possible for teachers and students to construct their own language learning environment based on the students' needs, interests and language proficiency. They can design different programs to cater for different purposes. The program can be simulation-based situations which they can freely play with and which might be impossible to conduct in the real world such as imitating the debates of the presidential election in USA or of the MPs in UK. The situations can cover a wide range from daily conversations between husband and wife to actually act a part in the film. Students are given control over the learning environment. They are able to manipulate the environment such as language, place, and time variables. They can also make a plan to run the simulations, to focus on different side of the simulation each time it is run, of course they can do this as many times as they wish.

The basis of VLE is, after all, text, or, for language learners, language. Therefore, in EFL setting, students should be exposed to authentic reading materials; teachers are supposed to provide meaningful, communicative, significant context for language learning to occur. The skills of the target language are not separate from each other, and they together are involved in all activities. For example, students in CBI are supposed to “read and take notes, listen and write a summary, or respond orally to things they have read or written”. The three theories on which CBI is based are “Language is text and discourse-based,” “language use draws on integrated skills,” and “language is purposeful” [Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 208]. In a vital sense, most of the virtual environment that participants experience is built through the use of their own language.

An important aspect of VLE is its potential for individualized learning. The Internet has developed a number of communication modes such as blog, face-book, e-mail, etc. This allowed for the creation of text-based virtual realities where every user could participate in creating new spaces, “rooms”. In all these virtual realities, CBI learning approaches enable multiple and flexible communication levels that can best suit each student's needs. Moreover, within these worlds, they could meet and communicate with each other disguised in diverse social identities.

### **Collaborative roles between the teachers and the students**

The combination of VLE and CBI will change the roles of both teachers and learners. For the teachers, they have to redefine their portfolio from that of a manager to that of a facilitator. For the learners, especially those who have fewer chances to live in the English-speaking countries, they will become autonomous and enjoy long-term benefits from this practice.

Virtual learning environment supports communication, coordination of actions, and collaboration in learning activities between many different people at the same time [Chee, 2001]. According to David Little, the developmental learning that unimpaired small children undergo takes place in interaction with parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, family friends, neighbors and so on. Education, whether institutionalized or not, is likewise an interactive, social process. For most of us, important learning experiences are likely to be remembered at least partly in terms of our relationships with one or more other learners or with a teacher [Little 1991]. The approach, then, emphasizes the need for a collaborative learning environment where teachers are to scaffold the students to the content and students interact and give each other support with their language learning. The classroom is a public space characterized by interaction and scaffolding.

In a communicative language class, the teachers are no longer the center; instead they act as a facilitator. In content-based foreign language instruction, the activities in the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught, and are designed to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language. The instructional approach adopted the topic-based instruction in which the syllabus is structured around the themes and the linguistic items in the syllabus are subordinated to the organizing function of the theme. While reading and writing the information on the different topics, the students used the content as a meaningful context for developing language and thinking skills.

Classroom activities on the teacher part might include: teacher-led introductions to technical elements of the content or theoretical models; schema-building; modeling; brief quizzes on the synthesis of



language skills and important factual elements in the content; worksheets, prepared by teacher or students, with questions or broad areas for consideration;

In a student-centered collaborative Learning classroom, peers might be a very useful learning resource for one another. The ability to communicate allows users to engage in meaningful language exchanges. If the listeners are puzzled or do not understand the meaning of the speakers whom they are communicating with, they will find it very natural to ask questions to others who are sharing the same virtual world. This meaningful interaction motivates learners to learn their target language naturally [Chee, 2001].

Classroom activities on the student part might include: student-led presentations and whole-group viewing of key scenes for group discussion and analysis, student brainstorming of questions for whole-group discussion; worksheets, prepared by teacher or students, with questions or broad areas for consideration and summary writing.

In a word, in the theme/topic-based CBI, the students' language skills are enhanced through focal attention to the content around the theme. The language materials are in real situations that are closely related to the students' lives and their interest. Students have ample chances to use what they have learned and thus gain a sense of achievement.

### **Integrated assessment of language and content in CBI**

The most common practice for the assessment on student performance in EFL classes are "discrete, decontextualized tasks," and their main focus is on linguistic structure or vocabulary [Kasper, 2000, p. 19-20]. However, students in CBI classes cannot be evaluated in the traditional way because they were exposed to more input and content information through the class. According to Kasper [2000], "designing authentic and interactive content-based assessment" was required because learners in CBI had to "complete discourse level tasks" [p. 20]. Assessment of CBI should not be simple and isolated; students must be required "to integrate information, to form, and to articulate their own opinions about the subject matter," not to analyze the linguistic structure of the target language [p. 20].

In content-based approach, students are oriented to such learning strategies as group work, holistic strategies, critical thinking, so in the test, the students are required to interact critically with the authentic materials in terms of meaningful and contextualized text to analyze their knowledge. The following are some of the suggestions that student progress can be assessed when classes are underway.

1. Daily quizzes can be used to check that content information is getting through to the students and that they are remembering important vocabulary.
2. Direct oral feedback during the classes can be useful as long as we are mindful of the proficiency level of the student.
3. Longer tests may also be given at the mid-term and the at the end of the term
4. Journals are also a useful diagnostic tool. Students are required to write a summary of the content of the lesson or write critically on any topic.
5. Oral presentation or report is also a best way to test the students' understanding of certain materials and their progress can be noticed in the long run.

In addition, regular assessment should be made and "checklists or inventories" can be used to assess language development: it may show each student's mastery of the lesson including concepts and structure. These methods have been developed as alternative strategies to assess students' learning.

### **Conclusion**

With virtual reality, students will put themselves in various realistic settings and learn the language by their experiences or control over their learning experience. ESL teachers can set up and save the environment depending on the students' need and this will facilitate learner-centered learning which emphasizes encouraging students to construct their own language knowledge. The objectives of CBI is to activate and develop students' existing English language skills which are applicable in future language development opportunities; to broaden students' understanding of English-speaking people; to successfully perform communicative interactions. Therefore, the integration of VLE and CBI could be used effectively in EFL classrooms. In conclusion, what virtual reality can do is to create experiences that help students understand places, people, language and processes better. Therefore, we can use virtual reality to learn the target language, to enhance our real social lives and understand others better. CBI can be considered as "the leading curricula approach in language teaching," as long as it is used in a suitable language teaching situation [Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 220].



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