Sailing the seven Cs

Deak Kirkham navigates the tides and currents of learning and teaching.

Deak Kirkham repeatedly places understanding other people's languages and cultures in his top five 'interesting things to do' and escapes from the confines of the north of England to do that as often as his mortgage repayments allow.

The term 'the seven seas', a phrase of considerable longevity, is used to suggest the immensity and mystery of the ocean. Of mysterious origin, the 'seven' element has referred to different 'seas' at various points in history. The National Ocean Service 'Ocean facts' webpage lists various sets of seven seas in three European historical contexts, whilst another online source (Lunde 2005) offers a further set of seven from medieval Arabian literature. This flexibility of this term is not irrelevant to this article, which will discuss the author's own particular seven Cs of language learning and teaching. These are Content, Context, Co-text, Cultural engagement, Correction and feedback, Curiosity and Creativity. In response, readers are invited to embark on their own metaphorical voyage through the tides and currents of teaching and learning and discover what seas they may.

1 Content

One stereotype of foreign language learning is the scenario of practising decontextualised sentences—often with odd or idiosyncratic vocabulary—with a focus on grammatical accuracy. Sadly, this stereotype remains all too frequent a feature of foreign language learning in far too many contexts. The emergence of communicative language teaching (CLT), however, has served to remedy it by integrating vocabulary and structures into meaningful communication contexts, for example practising past habituals, *used to* and *would*, in the context of a letter to a friend describing what the writer used to do or would do when they were children.

In the right hands this approach can be an effective pedagogy for certain structures. If space permitted, however, I would wish to challenge the dominance and ubiquity of CLT in EFL and the implicit assumption that this model has very general application across systems and structures. My more modest claim here is that CLT does not go far enough in terms of the degree to which it integrates content and context into language learning. An approach which does aim to do precisely that is content-based instruction (CBI). CBI invites language teachers not merely to find a communicative context in which to embed structures for the sake of practice, but to use some content or theme as the organising principle of

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a syllabus. CBI can take three forms according to Brinton, Snow and Wesche's (1989) seminal *Content and Language Learning*, one of which is theme-based study. Here, a theme of interest or of relevance to the students is chosen (for example, megacities, human resource outsourcing, or a history of coal mining in the UK) and various texts (written and spoken) and tasks and assessment are built around this theme with practice in language structures also integrated into the syllabus.

CBI is not a cure-all, however. Despite pluses in terms of student motivation, input and focus on meaning, some commentators (e.g. Master 2000; Valeo 2014) have noted a paucity of focus on form in the CBI approach. Grammar teaching may be unsystematic, or even absent. The absence of a theme which unites the texts of a unit of work may be a greater omission.

2 Context

Context has already been mentioned above. Language is inherently discourse, occurring with other language (in co-text) and in a communicative context. These realities cover such critical and prevalent linguistic phenomena as collocation, genre, the interpretation of irony, sarcasm, pun and other non-literal interpretations.

There are many contexts including learning contexts, personal contexts, linguistic contexts and psychological or teleological contexts. Students must be exposed to as wide a range of texts as possible; newspaper articles and non-authentic generic semi-academic texts are not enough. There must be a place for jokes, political speeches, recipes, text messages, biographies, love letters, operating instructions and interviews (not to mention maps, charts, diagrams and tables). Some books aim to do this; *Language Leader* (Cotton *et al.*) is one example, in my view. When taught well, with an emphasis on purpose and audience, structure, formality and language, this kind of variety should inspire and educate beyond the narrow agenda of CLT.

3 Co-text: constructions, combinations, collocations

We move from context (texts in context) to co-text (lexis in context). To recap themes of earlier articles in this series, traditional Chomskyan approaches to language divide between productive syntax and the lexical repository with the linguistic action taking place in the syntax. Considerable research has demonstrated that individual lexical items are not the be-all and end-all of lexis. From Lewis' (1993) lexical approach to the construction grammar of Goldberg (1995, 2006), it seems clear that a focus on individual words on one hand and (often decontextualised) grammar structures on the other may be less valuable than one that encourages the skilful identification, recording and memorisation of

multi-word combinations, ranging from abstract constructions to collocations.

Some examples of this are met early in English language learning ('How do you do?' and 'How's it going?' are constructions whose grammar is at best a secondary consideration) but by intermediate or advanced levels, collocations, phrases and abstract constructions are ubiquitous, and students need the tools to tackle this complexity.

Pedagogically, this perspective frees language teachers from the tyranny of teaching decontextualised grammar focusing on traditional structures such as tenses, passives, comparatives and instead invites them to include a whole range of structures from derivational morphology through to fixed phrases in their co-text teaching. This can be done systematically or incidentally as one works through a text. Whatever approach is taken, a thorough training in this co-text, however, is critical for effective learning.

4 Cultural engagement

So far, our Cs have looked inside language. However, language exists in a socio-cultural context and classroom-based language teaching should remain sensitive to the fact that the real world out-languages the classroom. The intercultural approach (e.g. Corbett 2003) is a much wider, more demanding, long-term, richer and authentic interpretation of language than CLT or even CBI and construction-based lexical approaches permit. Corbett encourages us to view the classroom as a springboard for engagement with the messy and perhaps daunting socio-cultural world outside. This is, perhaps, a choppy C, difficult to negotiate, but one across which it is necessary to sail to reach land.

5 Correction and feedback

The paucity of systematic focus on form that the CBI approach suggests has been noted. One response to this deficit of structure is correction. Although the evidence remains muddy, at least for correcting grammar through writing (e.g. Truscott 1996), anecdotal evidence suggests that feedback, both positive and corrective, can have an effect over the long term on accuracy, complexity and appropriacy of at least some aspects of written language. The same is argued for oral feedback (e.g. Lyster and Ranta 2013). Many feedback opportunities are available to the teacher; in monolingual environments with bi-lingual teachers, grammar translation appears to me an underused method of providing considerable opportunity for extensive written corrective feedback (WCF). The more innovative use of electronic, personalised journals seems to be on the rise as a means of generating writing and providing WCF.

6 Curiosity

Mention has been made previously in the context of language awareness of the need to inspire curiosity in language per se. Instead of an undue emphasis on grammar exercises with defined answers, or writing tasks with prescribed assessment criteria, we might dedicate more time to building curiosity about language. This could certainly involve language-related study (which might take the form of a CBI-style unit) looking at broad issues in applied linguistics:

language isolates, dialect variation, or (in the EFL context) world Englishes for example. Alternatively, looking into the origins of idioms or archaic words and phrases, such as the abbreviated Latin that surrounds the British Monarch on British coins or the slang terminology for the denominations of US coins and notes, serves as a vehicle for both language discovery and language practice.

Creativity

In terms of creativity, the use of poetry and drama in language teaching has a long history but is far from a staple element of adult second language learning. From 'filler'-type word games through to writing original poetry (something much more achievable for students than many teachers seem to believe), there is a host of activities which offer students the opportunity to play creatively with language. Poetry, specifically, may be an unfamiliar area of creativity for many students, but despite rumours to the contrary, it can often reveal itself to be a calm and enjoyable ocean to navigate.

> *However many Cs there may be, and whatever their names, only those who sail at all will discover a new country*

To C or not to C?

I hope this has been an enjoyable voyage. We've sailed seven Cs, but there may well be more Cs yet to navigate, not to mention Ds and As and Bs. Another C might be 'Customisation' which reminds us of the individuality of each student, a reality that the industrial educational environment of a large group or class can obscure. Students are individuals who learn in their own ways. Part of language learning is learning how one learns oneself. A further C might be the slightly awkward phrase 'Comparative correspondences' intended to suggest the making of comparisons with learners' L1. In an EFL industry which can in some contexts favour mono-lingual English speakers, opportunities for L1-L2 comparisons are often lost. Yet another C is 'computers', and the possibilities of technology and still another might be 'confidence', or even 'courage'. But seven Cs was sufficient for the navigators of old, and is enough for this article. However many Cs there may be, and whatever their names, only those who sail at all will discover a new country.

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References available from the author on request