Mexican Secondary School Students' Perception of Learning the History of Mexico in English*

La percepción de alumnos mexicanos de secundaria cuando aprenden la historia de México en inglés

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This article focuses on Mexican students' perceptions of learning the history of Mexico in English through content-based instruction, which is one of many types of bilingual pedagogical approaches that are now considered established approaches in Mexico and around the globe. A phenomenological approach was chosen in order to understand and examine participants' lived experiences through semi-structured interviews; this in turn led to the discovery of their acceptance or rejection towards learning the history of Mexico in English. The data suggest that despite students' initial rejection to learning a sensitive subject as is the history of Mexico in English, most students found the content-based method as being meaningful, thus, they had a sense of pride in the end.

Key words: Attitudes, belief, content-based instruction, emotions, learning strategies, perceptions.

Este artículo se centra en la percepción de los estudiantes mexicanos ante el aprendizaje de la historia de México en inglés a través de la enseñanza basada en contenidos, el cual es uno de los muchos modelos de métodos pedagógicos bilingües establecido en México y el mundo. Se eligió un enfoque fenomenológico con el fin de conocer y analizar las experiencias vividas por los participantes a través de entrevistas semi-estructuradas; esto a su vez permitió descubrir su aceptación o rechazo hacia el aprendizaje de la historia de México en inglés. Los datos demuestran que a pesar del rechazo inicial de los estudiantes hacia un tema tan delicado, al final la mayoría de los estudiantes encontraron el método significativo, despertando en ellos un sentimiento de orgullo.

Palabras clave: actitudes, creencias, emociones, enseñanza basada en contenidos, estrategias de aprendizaje, percepciones.

Introduction

The idea at the heart of content-based instruction (CBI) is the belief that students can learn content and language simultaneously (Stoller, 2004). Some CBI programs focus more on language, other types of CBI tend to lean more towards content, and still other CBI curriculums emphasize both language and the content equally (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). In all cases, however, CBI programs are premised on the idea that language proficiency and content knowledge can be developed at the same time (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2011). The challenge, of course, is how best to promote this kind of concomitant learning. In an effort to better understand the optimal conditions that encourage concurrent language and content acquisition, a six-month investigation was conducted focusing on student perceptions of learning the history of Mexico through CBI.

Background

The focus of my research is on Mexican students' perceptions of learning English through CBI. The data were collected from a secondary school in Leon, Guanajuato, Mexico.

The school consists of primary and secondary school education. This particular school's English language program is currently undergoing a change. The school's primary level students are taught English through a content language integrated learning (CLIL) approach.[1] Due to this change in primary, the school's secondary program decided to pilot a CBI program in the following areas: (1) geography, (2) world history, and (3) the history of Mexico. The reason why the school authorities chose these particular subjects was twofold: (1) students already have background knowledge in these content areas that are thoroughly covered in fourth, fifth, and sixth grade of primary school (Secretaría de Educación Pública, n.d.) and

(2) to help develop analytical and critical thinking skills through a foreign language. The CBI courses are reinforced with five hours of English language teaching (ELT) instruction per week which are mainly based on an ELT book. However, the ELT teacher aids students in content subjects when required (projects and oral presentations). This model, in which students study content in a foreign language (L2) and also study the L2 separately, is known as *adjunct language instruction* (Brinton et al., 2011).

The teachers required to teach the lessons were not expected to be content specialists, but were expected to have a C2 level of the English language according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This is due to the fact that in Leon, Guanajuato, it is difficult to find a teacher that is both a content specialist and an ELT specialist. Nevertheless, in these particular posts teachers are expected to invest extra hours in order to gain deeper knowledge of content areas.

The 11 students that participated in my research were all third graders (equivalent to US 8th graders) of secondary and chosen randomly. They were asked six main questions along with follow-up questions depending on their answers given. Moreover, the participants had multi-levels of English proficiency, ranging from A2 to B2.[2] The research participants have been in the school since primary and have had regular ELT classes. This, however, was their first year in a CBI program.

Literature Review

This segment is divided into four sections: (1) a definition of CBI; (2) the evolution of CBI; (3) a brief overview of research in content-based pedagogy relevant to my research concerns and cognitive processes; and (4) a definition of *perceptions*, which is the focus of this current investigation.

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[1] CLIL is a modern/derivative name for CBI (Dickey, 2010).

[2] Levels are according to the CEFR.

Definition of Content-Based Instruction

CBI is a method to language curriculum design and pedagogy. It is primarily concerned with "the integration of content learning with language teaching aims" (Brinton et al., 2011, p. ix). In one sense, of course, everything that is taught through the medium of a target language has content (Jiang, 2000). However, CBI's focus on teaching a specific body of knowledge through an L2 makes it different from regular ELT classes (Brinton et al., 2011). In short, CBI is the teaching of curriculum content through the medium of an L2. The content that is taught is normally outside the traditional course material of language programs. Traditional ELT course syllabi are usually designed around the topics in a given course book even if some cross-curricular aspects or topics are more and more commonly included in ELT courses at schools; in a CBI course, however, most material is part of a curricular subject or designed and/or adapted from outside sources (Brinton et al., 2011).

Development and Evolution of CBI

The origins of CBI are often erroneously placed in US and Canadian immersion programs (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). However, CBI has existed in one form or another for centuries. Indeed, the roots of CBI can be traced back at least as far as the fourth century AD, when St. Augustine used CBI: He placed an emphasis on the necessity of learning meaningful content during the process of language acquisition (Brinton et al., 2011).

In Mexico, CBI can be traced to before the Conquest (Foster, 2007). If we look back into the 16th century[3] for instance, historical records show that Spanish missionaries taught the natives[4] religion and different trades in Spanish rather than in the local indigenous languages (Arriaga, 1978). This method of language teaching and learning proved to be so effective that the "Indians" were soon teaching content in Spanish to other natives—and even to Spaniards. Schools such as the University for Indian Nobles were opened in which native Mexicans taught religious doctrine to Spanish settlers in both Spanish and Latin (Foster, 2007). Given CBI's cultural heritage and historical grounding, perhaps it is not surprising that the teaching method has been reimagined and reintroduced to modern learners.

Research About Content-Based Pedagogy and Cognitive Processes

Advocates of CBI argue that its effectiveness stems from how information is processed in the brain. Cognitive research suggests that the brain stores information in networks (Field, 2003). The greater and stronger the numbers of connections within and between these networks, the better the information is learned. Research suggests that reinforcing and building links among ideas and understanding augments learning and retention (Mugler & Landbeck, 2000). Learning content through language produces just these types of strong connections. This may explain why learning *in* a language as opposed to learning *about* a language allows second languages to be acquired more easily (Brinton et al., 2011).

Language acquisition, of course, entails more than simply cognitive processing. It involves the "whole person." To truly understand a language approach, it is necessary to know something about how it impacts students affectively, socially, and psychologically. It is

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3   During the 16th century Hernán Cortes, leading 200 Spanish troops and a phalanx of indigenous armies, conquered Mexico and Mesoamerica; culture, religion, and language were imposed by Spain on the American natives.

4   The natives that are being referred to are native Mesoamerican tribes such as Aztecs who lived in Tenochtitlan (modern day Mexico City), Mayas who mainly lived in the south of Mexico such as in the ancient city of Palenque which is a Mayan City in Chiapas (Foster, 2007).

useful, then, to understand students' perceptions of a new teaching methodology: looking at pedagogy from the point of view of one's students enhances the possibility that learning will take place (Cothran & Hodges, 2006). As Cullingford (1991) notes, students' views "deserve to be taken into account because they know better than anyone which teaching styles are successful, which techniques of learning bring out the best of them" (p. 2).

Another important reason for students' views to be taken into account in teaching is that learners and instructors often see the same lesson in entirely different ways. Nunan (as cited in Stewart, 2007) explains that:

> Teachers tend to assume that the way we look at a task will be the way learners look at it. However, there is evidence that while we as teachers are focusing on one thing, learners are focusing on something else. (p. 20)

This type of disconnection between teachers and students is illustrated in a study by Violand-Sanchez (1995). Violand-Sanchez investigated 20 Hispanic secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) students who were missing class regularly due to "boring" content. The name of one of the participants was Carlos. Carlos responded in regard to missing ESL classes regularly:

> *Señora*, I am bored. I am repeating the intermediate ESL level and I can't take it anymore. I'm tired of studying the gerunds again! Can't we study things we use? Why do we need two periods of grammar? Why can't we study science? (Violand-Sanchez, 1995, p. 48)

Because teachers and students perceive content and instruction differently, it is important to consider how students feel and to understand their reasons for accepting or rejecting a given method.

In other research that was carried out, student motivation and meaningful content played a role in successful learning. In a study which aimed to investigate the effectiveness of CBI in oral communicative competence development of 16 Colombian university students, Corrales and Maloof (2009) reported that after one semester of CBI, learners were able to "activate their prior knowledge, lessen anxiety, raise their self-confidence and become motivated towards language learning" (p. 15). Moreover, Lafayette and Buscaglia (1985) carried out research using fourth semester French university students and compared the progress between students enrolled in an experimental CBI course versus students taking traditional French classes. At the end of this study not only were positive attitudes towards learning content discovered but also a substantial advancement in language proficiency took place comparison with those students of a similar level taking traditional French classes. Lafayette and Buscaglia state that:

> The study is important because it challenges the conventional assumptions regarding the way L2 skills are acquired and improved, and offers the student a valuable time and money saving option since he or she might be able to study a specific content while simultaneously improving L2 skills. (p. 323)

Deckerk (2004) also mentions the importance of content needing to be appealing to students and how when this occurs it facilitates learning language when carefully selecting content of exchange.

Because of the critical importance of understanding instruction through the eyes of students, I wanted to discover what my own students' perceptions were about learning Mexican history in English. I wanted to discover how a group of students who were learning the history of Mexico in English perceived their experiences in learning language and content at the same time.

Defining Perceptions

Perceptions are believed to first have been studied in philosophy by Locke and Hume at the beginning

of the 18th century (Despagne, 2010). Since then, the concept has been employed in a wide range of fields: sociology, anthropology, socio linguistics, social psychology, and so on (Moore, 2007). For this reason, there is no single, established definition of perceptions and each field of study has its own technical understanding of the word. Depending on the field and the focus of research, perceptions may be related to feelings, beliefs, experiences, preferences, mental images, values, concepts, heuristics, stereotypes, and knowledge (amongst others). The previous definitions shed light on the meaning of perceptions; however, when deciding how best to describe perception for the purposes of my own research, I wanted a definition that was simple, clear, and direct enough to be useful. In other words, in science a theory should be—*ceteris paribus*—the simplest possible explanation that effectively addresses a given phenomenon (Occam's razor, n.d.). Based on the previous assumptions— variants of the principle of parsimony (Braithwaite, 2007)—I decided that for my research I would rely on Da Silva's (2005) usefully "parsimonious" definition of perception: "a physical and intellectual ability used in mental processes to recognize, interpret, and understand events" (p. 10).

Method

I decided to use a qualitative methodology, a phenomenological research design/method, and semi-structured interviews as my primary data gathering tool.

Defining Qualitative Research

Qualitative research (QR) is a method which attempts to comprehend individuals, groups of people, and/or sets of research problems—in this case, student perceptions—from the point of view of the subject or subjects involved in the research (Labuschangne, 2003). QR is particularly effective in attaining data concerning the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of a particular social group (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005).

One of the challenges of qualitative research is that researchers must suppress their own experiences and beliefs so that personal bias does not contaminate the interpretation of data and research findings (Wiersma, 1995). These views shed light on that situation for the type of research I was carrying out. QR would be the most suitable methodology to employ for my project. Moreover, it drew my attention to the fact that my research also called for a phenomenological design/ approach due to its nature.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology dates back to Kant and Hegel (Groenewald, 2004); in the 20th century, pheno- menology was most closely associated with Husserl (Vandenberg, 1997). Husserl argued that real life experiences are matters of personal interpretation, are necessarily subjective, and that anything coming from outside authentic personal experience is suspect. "Husserl called this philosophical method *phenomenology*, the science of pure phenomena" (Eagleton as cited in Groenewald, 2004, p. 55). According to Welman and Kruger (1999), "phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved" (p. 189). A researcher who applies phenomenological assumptions to his or her research design seeks to understand the "lived experiences" of the individuals participating in the research (Groenewald, 2004). Because the nature of my research involves under-standing a social reality as experienced and interpreted by others, I decided to place my design within the theoretical parameters set by the phenomenological tradition.

Research Ethics

Research ethics exist to guarantee that people who are involved in a study as subjects are protected

when carrying out field research. Research ethics ensures the universal principles of *justice*, *respect*, and the *avoidance of harm* to be sustained (Ulrich, 2003). In general terms, the researcher should be careful not to expose people to harm for their own good or for the good of science especially when doing research with children or adolescents (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Schenk & Williamson, 2005).

Hence, I issued letters of consent to participants' parents, as participants were all minors, and referred to them with the letter P followed by the number of the order in which they were interviewed in order to protect their identities.

Description of Interviews

According to King and Horrocks (2010), "interviews are widely used in phenomenological research, though they are more dominant in some traditions than others" (p. 182). They describe interviews as the "exemplary" method for interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) "because of the emphasis in this approach on exploring how people interpret their experience" (p. 182).

Interviews in qualitative research refer to the one-on-one encounters between interviewer and interviewee aimed at understanding subjects' lives and their personal experiences expressed in their own words (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Kvale (1996) states that an interview is "an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest" (p. 14). In other words, if both researcher and participant are interested in a theme, meaningful talk will occur. Rubin and Rubin (1995) claim that "at a basic level, people like to talk about themselves: they enjoy the sociability of a long discussion and are pleased that somebody is interested in them" (p. 103).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Holloway (1997) claims that investigators who use phenomenology avoid the use of "set"

techniques. Hycner (1999) similarly asserts that "there is an appropriate reluctance on the part of phenomenologists to focus too much on specific steps" (p. 143). Hycner declares it is impossible to impose an approach on a phenomenon "since that would do a great injustice to the integrity of that phenomenon" (p. 144). Flexibility, then, is at the heart of phenomenological research, and it is for this reason that I settled on a semi-structured interview protocol.

Semi-structured interviews are a type of non-standardized interviews carried out in qualitative analysis. In this model, a researcher has a theme, issue, a question and/or phenomena that need to be understood; here, questions can be varied as required, depending on the response of the interviewee (Corbetta, 2003). These positive aspects highlighted by Corbetta (2003) made it clear that semi-structure interviewing was the most suitable kind for my research. Therefore, I believe that semi-structured interviews enabled me to elicit extra data that helped me towards my end goal of understanding student perceptions.

Data Analysis, Findings and Discussion

After I analyzed the data I collected in my study, I discovered iterative patterns in the participant responses; I then look for indicators of students' perception and classified responses into five categories: (1) positive, (2) negative, (3) neutral, (4) needs a follow-up question, or (5) not relevant. Data from Question 1 (What was your first impression when you learned that the history of Mexico was going to be taught in English?) highlighted a negative stance which indicated that there was a certain sense of rejection towards participants' initial perception of CBI. The actual percentages to participants' answers are shown in Table 1 whereas Table 2 illustrates the categories and subcategories drawn from those answers.

Table 1. Question 1

Categories	Percentage	Number of Participants
Negative	58%	7
Positive	21%	2
Neutral	0%	0
Needs follow-up question	21%	2

Table 2. Categories and Subcategories for Question 1

Categories	Subcategories				
	Pos.	**Neg.**	**Neu.**	**NF**	**NR**
Teacher	0	1	0	0	10
Content	1	7	1	1	1
Language	2	6	1	1	1
Content and Language	2	4	1	4	0
Method	3	2	0	2	4
Classmates	0	2	0	0	9
Total	8	22	3	8	25

Note. Pos. = Positive; Neg. = Negative; Neu. = Neutral, meaning that students' responses were not positive, negative, or mixed; NF = Needs follow-up question; NR = Not relevant in reference to this category.

Analysis and Findings of Answers to Question 1

Seven participants expressed negative feelings towards the idea of learning English through content. Four participants explained that they felt learning content through language would be "difficult" and therefore unpleasant. The following quote is an example of why one participant felt this way:

My first impression was that the topic would be more difficult, because history is very theoretical and in English . . . [a language]

that we are still studying. So combined we won't understand anything. (P3)

This comment shows why P3 thought that learning both content and language at the same time would lead to a lack of understanding of either. P3 feels that theoretical subjects are difficult and considers the history of Mexico to be too theoretical; theoretical subjects may have a negative connotation for the student and could be something that the student rejects. Moreover, it is possible that P3 feels that English should be learned *before* trying to use it to study content. This comment could be an indicator that P3 feels that there is a gap in regard to language, and that may be the reason he believes that learning would not take place. At the same time, there were other factors that affect the learners such as inappropriate content.

P5 describes his perception of CBI as being "illogical". P5 also pointed out that he felt learning the history of Mexico would be dull:

P5: Illogical! If we are Mexican students that talk in Spanish how could they [school] teach us Mexican history in English? History is not an interesting subject for many; furthermore if it's taught in English.

Interlocutor: English? What do you mean?

P5: If it's in English its worse for me, because I don't like English for this [history], I like English to listen to music…and stuff.

P5 is unhappy with the decision taken by the school to have this particular content subject taught in a foreign language and believes that history is not a subject that many are keen on—including himself. This is clearly a problem. Smyth (2006) states:

When students feel that their lives, experiences, cultures, and aspirations are ignored, trivialized, or denigrated by school and the curriculum, they develop hostility to the institution of schooling. They feel that schooling is simply not worth the emotional and psychological investment necessary to warrant their serious involvement. (p. 279)

Moreover, Silva (1997) comments on unsuitable topics of assignments in CBI and explains that if a subject is not appealing to learners it becomes more difficult for learners to cope with CBI lessons. Silva (1997) warns against imposing themes that students may prefer not to explore.

Analysis and Findings of Answers to Question 2

After analyzing the answers to Question 2 (How did your impression change after one semester of CBI?), I found a pattern in students' responses that provided evidence that student perceptions had shifted significantly from negative to positive. This change was due to two main reasons: (1) The students' own personal strategies changed as a result of their learning experience, and (2) the classroom atmosphere described by students led to a more positive attitude.

Table 3 reveals reasons that influenced change in students' perceptions. Table 4 shows how I categorized key words or phrases in which students show positive attitudes due to their own strategies and the healthy learning environment described in their answers.

Table 3. Categories and Subcategories for Question 2

Categories	Subcategories				
	Pos.	Neg.	Neu.	NF	NR
Teacher	1	0	0	0	10
Content	6	3	1	0	1
Language	6	3	0	0	2
Content and Language	2	4	4	0	1
Method	3	0	0	0	8
Classmates	3	0	0	0	8
Total	21	10	5	0	30

Oxford (1990) explains "learning strategies are actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situation" (p. 8). P3 first viewed the history of Mexico as difficult and theoretical. A possible reason for this student's change of attitude towards CBI could be based on the strategy used by the participant. The participant mentions: (1) That one really has to pay more attention to some parts, and (2) that one has to read again for better understanding.

Based on P3's answer, I concluded that the participant's use of learning strategies resulted in a positive change of perception about CBI. In this particular experience, P3 did not mention anything about language and therefore it can be concluded that learning strategies used and new experiences might have benefited him both in terms of coping with content as well as with language.[5]

P7, on the other hand, believes that learning content through language was a good way to practice English. According to Hernández (2003)

> For students learning *in* the language rather than *about* the language, effective communication is interactive, authentic, and meaningful, with ample opportunities to hear and respond in the target language [practice] and to get feedback from native speakers, the teacher, instructional assistants, volunteers, and other English language learners. (Emphasis in the original, p. 126)

P7 explains how learning language through content enabled her to practice and made the class more interesting. I believe that the participant experienced learning *in* the language instead of *about* the language; hence, English was better learned when language is practiced in a similar way in which a first language is acquired (Brinton et al., 2011).

5　A follow-up question was needed for further data and more accurate assumption.

Table 4. Positive Attitudes Due to Strategies and Atmosphere

Strategies	Atmosphere
P1: We worked and did our homework…so history was an easy subject. P2: There are things that I didn't understand but we read two times. P3: The topic wasn't very difficult . . . obviously like everything there are some parts that you had to pay more attention to for real or read it again for better understanding. P7: Now I think that is a good idea because we learn more English and have more opportunities to practice it.	P6: I don't have scared, because the teacher is a comedy actor, and I think the history class was fun. [*sic*] P7: The classes were interested and funny. P8: It was very funny and we learn a lot. My view of the class changed a lot because I didn't feel stressed or bored and I had fun with my friends because we could talk.

Analysis and Findings of Answers to Questions 3 and 4

After analyzing Question 3 (How did you feel about having performed *El Grito de Independencia*[6] in English?) and Question 4 (How would you compare having performed it in English in comparison with having performed it in Spanish?), the findings suggest that in general, students mainly held a positive stance towards this experience. Table 5 shows students' feelings toward Question 3.

Table 5. Student's Feelings Toward Question 3

Category of Answers	Pos.	Neg.	Neu.	NF	NR
Number of Answers	8	1	1	0	1

The data collected for this question suggests that students viewed this particular performance of *El Grito de Independencia* as an opportunity to do the following: (1) practice language, (2) experiment with language, and (3) use language as a tool to share participants' culture and traditions:

> I felt so excited but I think that we could have done better, maybe the time was too short…um I think that we needed more time to prepare but at least it worked. (P1)
>
> It's a tradition to make it in Spanish, but in English it was so different, it was really funny [fun]. I felt good because it was interesting to make to make our presentation of history of Mexico in English. (P2)
>
> I think that if you want to do something you can do it in many languages, in this case, English, that we used it to interpret the independence of Mexico and I feel good because we did something about our traditions and country in English. (P3)

Here, the participants clearly explain how they found this event to be an opportunity to use English as a tool to interpret something that is part of their identity and culture as well as its being fun and exciting. Moreover, these answers suggest that the use of English was meaningful. Here, the students were able to use English to both express something meaningful as well as use the content language in the target language.

Answers to Question 4 took my understanding of students' perception of CBI further as I discovered how meaningful learning had become for them.

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6   *El Grito de Independencia* or *El Grito Dolores* "is the call that Miguel Hidalgo made for the people of Mexico to rise up against the authorities of New Spain on September 16, 1810, in the town of Dolores, near Guanajuato, initiating Mexico's War of Independence. This event is commemorated every year in Mexico on the night of September 15th" (Barbezat, n.d., para. 1).

P3 felt proud about being able to practice content language knowledge in a meaningful situation; the participants' answers mirror Violand-Sanchez's (1995) study, who also recorded a similar case. In my research meaningful content leads to acceptance of content whereas in her research lack of meaningful content led to students' rejection of content.

Analysis and Findings of Answers to Questions 5 and 6

In the next section, I shall discuss answers to Question 5 (What do you find most difficult about learning the history of Mexico in English?) and Question 6 (What do you find more challenging—the subject or the language?) of my research.

Answers to Question 5 showed what strategies students used to cope with difficulties; therefore, in order to categorize each participant's answer I devised

a table tallying the reasons why students found learning the history of Mexico in English difficult and what each student did in order to cope with it (see Table 6).

Here I found patterns in students' answers that helped me understand why students were experiencing difficulties; nine participants described how language was a hindrance due to reasons such as proficiency. One clear example of why most participants felt this way was given by P5: "Trying to express my ideas to the teacher, I don't have the enough vocabulary to say what I actually want to say."

When students explained reasons for having difficulties, most participants mentioned that certain "words" or "vocabulary" hindered comprehension and communication. Several researchers echo concerns in regard to the importance of vocabulary teaching in CBI classrooms (Carlo et al., 2004; Evans & Green,

Table 6. Difficulties and Strategies
Found by Students

Participant	Difficulties with CBI	Learner Strategies
P1	Teaching method	Classroom dynamics
P2	L2 (English)	Use L1 (Code switch)
P3	Language and content (low vocabulary proficiency)	Free time reading practice
P4	L2 (English)	Use L1(Code switch)
P5	Communication (level of proficiency/lack of vocabulary)	Use of L1/L2 (Code switch)
P6	Language (proficiency)	Teacher's help
P7	Words in book (vocabulary)	Rereads
P8	Language (proficiency vocabulary)	Teacher's help
P9	Unknown words (knowledge of content vocabulary)	Just try to understand
P10	Content language (language proficiency)	Peers' help
P11	Language (proficiency level)	Teacher's and peers' help

Table 7. Results From Question 6

Themes	Category	Tallies	Percentages
Most Challenging	Language	9	82%
	Content	1	9%
	Content and Language	1	9%

2007; Short, 2002). In my research participants openly expressed the same problems as the above researchers. Finally, I present the analysis of the answers for Question 6: What do you find more challenging—the subject or the language? (see Table 7).

Question 6 revealed that after one semester, 82% of the participants perceived that language was still the most difficult aspect of learning the history of Mexico in English. However, I discovered that some students felt that language was the most difficult aspect because they already had prior knowledge of the content area.

> P2: I think the language, because we know a lot about history but sometimes in English it's more difficult.
>
> P3: I find more challenging the language because when we were kids, we already learned or listened to some history of our country.
>
> P5: The language, because I have been studying Mexican history since I was in 3rd grade of primary and I know what happened.

I believe that students' background knowledge helped them cope with content and therefore language was perceived as the primary challenge.

Summary of Findings

There are three main findings that come to light based on this research: (1) Despite most Mexican students initially viewing CBI negatively, students changed their minds and CBI became a positive experience for them; (2) Although Mexican students changed their minds about CBI, they still found the pedagogical approach to be challenging; (3) The most important factors that influenced students' negative

perceptions of CBI were the students' lack of language proficiency, unpopular content, and the imposition of language on content. In the following sections I shall discuss these three findings in turn.

Students' Change of Perception

Most students initially viewed CBI as "boring" and "difficult." Over the course of the semester, however, most of them came to embrace CBI. The primary reason that students changed their minds about CBI was because they came to feel that learning language through content enabled them to practice language in a meaningful way. The shift to CBI in the teaching of the history of Mexico made both language and content more interesting and meaningful; that is, students could see that the English language had an actual use and tangible benefits.

Challenges Participants Experienced

At first CBI was referred to as being a difficult method; the word "difficult" was used by participants with a negative connotation. This was due to their lack of language proficiency. CBI is demanding; talking about subjects such as history in a foreign language requires a great deal of effort. At the end of my research, however, I discovered that the word "difficult" had changed its meaning for my students. Students used it synonymously with the word "challenging." This is because students realized that being forced to find ways to overcome language gaps ultimately resulted in a positive learning experience. In addition, after one semester, most students stated that CBI was not as hard as they had initially perceived

it would be; they mentioned how much fun they had had and how learning had become interesting.

Factors That Influenced Students' Perceptions of CBI

When analyzing factors that influenced students' perception towards CBI, the most important factor was the students' lack of language proficiency. The second factor I discovered was that some students rejected CBI because they felt Mexican history was an uninteresting subject; for instance, some students mentioned that history was "theoretical" and "boring"—and if the class was taught in English, the subject would be worse. One particular student predicted that the rest of their classmates would reject this specific content. The last factor was that students' viewed Mexican history in English as being "weird" and seemingly "illogical." Indeed, one group of students viewed English as an imposition because the foreign language "invaded" their culture and traditions.

Conclusion

In regard to the methodology, I believe that CBI is "easier said than done." Besides the challenges presented above, there are a number of other difficulties that have to be addressed.

(1) Finding qualified teachers who are masters of both language and content is the most difficult part in my opinion. You cannot just put anybody who speaks English in a classroom; they also need the pedagogical skills that a professional possesses in order to deliver a sound class. In my 12 years of experience, the reality is that in Mexico there are very few content teachers with a high command of English (C1/C2); in other words, CBI teachers are usually regular English as a foreign language teachers with little or no mastery of content subject or vice versa a content teacher with little knowledge of the target language.

(2) You need to adapt and create appropriate material, such as textbooks or course books, visual aids, technology, and planned field trips that fulfill the Mexican Board of Education's requirements.

(3) Selecting a model of CBI which is appropriate to the particular teaching and learning context, is also very important and in my opinion it might take several years to fully adapt and readapt a program.

(4) The majority of ESL literature and common sense tells us that language teachers should always keep student needs foremost in their thoughts as they develop their courses (Silva, 1997; Smyth, 2006). It is important to remember, however, that students themselves are not always aware of what it is they need or even want. For this reason, it may be necessary to "force" new methods on reluctant students who might then change their perceptions. This, of course, poses further problems to CBI adoption.

(5) The slow pace of English acquisition can be frustrating. There is an expectation that a new methodology such as CBI will deliver dramatic improvements in English learning. But when it comes to language acquisition, there are no short-cuts, no "magic bullet." Although the goal of CBI is to increase the level of language proficiency, "It is inappropriate to assume that desired levels of proficiency and accuracy will emerge miraculously from content lessons taught in a second or foreign language" (Met, 1991, p. 285).

Recommendations for Future Research

My research generated a number of interesting questions that I would like to pursue in future research. In my opinion, the following questions represent fertile ground for further studies.

1. **What learning strategies do students use in CBI classrooms?** I discovered that students developed a number of strategies in order to cope with the demands of learning about content in a foreign language. However, the small scope of my investigation did not allow me to investigate these strategies in any depth. Further research into the

role of learning strategies within the context of CBI would be useful. Findings from such research could aid program designers, researchers, teachers, and students when making a transition from traditional language pedagogies to CBI.

2. **Are particular content areas more practical than others?** The difficulties for students learning the history of Mexico in English (i.e., cultural imposition, etc.) led me to wonder if other subjects would be easier or more difficult to teach in a foreign language. Another research recommendation, then, would be to investigate whether some content areas are more suited to a CBI method than others. Are the humanities easier to teach in a second language than, say, mathematics? Or would the sciences, which are concrete and specific, be easier to learn than more subjective subjects like history or literature?

3. **What is the correct balance between content and language instruction?** Researchers such as Nunan (2001) and Stoller (2002) have emphasized having the right balance between content and language when designing CBI courses. Research that looked into finding an ideal balance in CBI would be very useful. The most important task would be finding a way to determine what students actually lack in terms of language needs in order to carefully design courses and find the equilibrium that in some occasions CBI courses lack. This may be achieved through diagnostic tests, proficiency tests, or even aptitude tests.

4. **Does a content-based instruction approach actually produce better language outcomes than regular ELT classes?** This would require a large scale study that compared other methods with CBI and that utilized pre-course and post-course assessment activities and procedures. This kind of research is obviously outside what is practically possible for a single researcher, but of course would be tremendously important to

modern language learning and teaching research (for an idea of how such research could be carried out see, for instance, the Pennsylvania Project[7]).

Closing Statements

My research was based on students' perceptions; however, I also discovered in my research that CBI helped most students learn both content and language, which is the end goal of CBI. I discovered that most students came to terms with themselves during difficult times in regard to not always understanding the content and language when problems arose and instead found solutions to problems and difficulties. I learned that it was necessary for students to negotiate with other students and teachers when situations were beyond their control. Personally, this experience helped me to better understand the lived experience of this micro-culture in my research as regards learning through CBI.

It is my hope that this research raises awareness of CBI and makes a small contribution to the study of a method that is increasingly important in Mexico as well as all over the globe.

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7   The Pennsylvania Project [was] a four year study initiated in 1965 and designed to evaluate the relative effectiveness of three teaching strategies: traditional, . . . audio-lingual, . . . and modified audio-lingual (Valette, 1969, p. 396).

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