

The Effect of Content-based Language Instruction on EFL learners' Attention, Engagement, Volunteering and Verbal Interaction

Mohammad Ali Heidari-Shahreza

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University,
Shahreza, Isfahan, Iran

E-mail address: maheidari.sh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Encouraged by the increasing popularity of content-based courses in academic contexts, the present study explored the possible effects of content-based language instruction (CBLI) on 72 Iranian university students' motivated behaviors, namely, attention, engagement, eager volunteering and verbal interaction. The participants, who took part in the study, were divided into two groups of language class (LC) and content class. The average age in both groups was 22 with almost the same language proficiency level. To gather information on the participants' motivated behaviors in language class and content class, a modified version of COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) and MOLT (Motivation Orientation of Language Teaching) classroom observation scheme was implemented. Each class was observed five times during the first semester of the educational year 2012-2013. The observations took place with three-week interval between them which totally covered almost the whole semester. The analysis of scheme-based classroom observation for a whole semester revealed that the students in the content-based class paid attention, engaged in and volunteered for learning tasks and activities more than their counterparts in the language-based class did. They also had more contribution to the total verbal interaction in the classroom. In the light of the findings, this study suggests that by shifting the focus in English language classrooms from form-focused to meaning-focused, language instructors can create more opportunities for the students to participate in learning activities and remain well-motivated throughout the semester.

Keywords: Content-based language instruction; motivated behaviors; university students; EAP; verbal interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Content-Based Language Instruction (CBLI, hereafter) has been widely used in second language instruction for more than thirty years in North America and Europe (Garner, & Borg, 2005; Huang, 2011). CBLI courses, despite surface differences, are a combination of language instruction and various subject matters such as art, math, science or chemistry (see also James, 2014). These courses have been internationally welcomed at different levels of schooling and higher education (e.g. Alexander, 2012). The urgency the students feel to improve their English, on one hand, and the efficacy of combining language and subject matters on the other hand, had made CBLI very popular in many academic contexts (Garner, & Borg, 2005). Iranian

universities have also welcomed these courses to a significant extent (see Amiryousefi, & Zarei, 2011). Yet, there are still doubts and debates about different aspects of CBLI in Iranian academic contexts with little accumulated research to shed light on the way ahead. One such debate is concerned with whether or not CBLI can do any better than traditional language-based instruction to motivate university students to participate in tasks and activities in English classrooms. Motivation is particularly important because on one hand, it is the force behind students to constantly improve their English and on the other hand, in an EFL context, students are much more likely to digress from learning because for one thing, there are fewer opportunities to use English outside the class and even university students are very likely to lose their interest or feel frustrated in such context (see Amiryousefi, & Zarei, 2011; Özgür, & Griffiths, 2013; Yaghoubi, 2013 for recent studies on motivation in EFL/ESL context). Therefore, the present study set out to investigate whether or not content-based courses can be more successful in motivating students in comparison with language-based ones. To this aim, following Huang (2011), four motivational factors were explored in two otherwise similar language- and content-based classes to contrast and evaluate the new trend in Iranian context in language instruction (i.e. CBLI) with traditional language-based instruction.

2. BACKGROUND

Within the context of the present study, motivational factors were defined as situational variables in language classrooms which may contribute to the enhancement of learners' motivation. In fact, this perspective toward motivational factors was in line with the recent shift from the focus on integrative motivation to situational factors in research in language-learning motivation (Huang, 2011). In this study, four motivational factors (or indicators) were taken into account. Following Huang (2011), 'attention', 'engagement', 'eager volunteering' and 'verbal interaction' were the situational factors which contributed to students' sustained motivated behavior in language classrooms. The first three factors (i.e. 'attention', 'engagement' and 'eager volunteering') actually connoted students' attraction and participation in learning tasks and activities during class times.

To put them within a scientific perspective, based on the criteria set by Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008), 'attention' was defined as the incidence when 2/3 of the students paid attention, indicated by their looking at the instructor (or another student who is contributing to the task), the visual stimuli, etc. Likewise, 'engagement' indicated that 2/3 of the students attentively and carefully took part in the ongoing tasks or activities in the class. 'Eager volunteering' based on the same criteria, indicated that at least 1/3 of the students voluntarily, without coaxing them by the instructor, take part in an activity, answer a question, etc. Finally, 'verbal interaction' referred to the language produced by the students in interacting with their instructor and classmates. In addition to being an indicator of motivation, learner-learner as well as learner-teacher interaction is valued greatly for during interaction, students may notice the drawbacks in their interlanguage, give and receive feedback, negotiate meaning and acquire language input (see Heidari-Shahreza, Dabaghi & Kassaian, 2012).

3. METHODOLOGY

Based on Huang (2011), the present study aimed at exploring how university students' motivated behaviors namely, the amount of attention they pay in class (i.e. attention factor), the extent of their participation in and volunteering for class tasks and activities (i.e. 'engagement' and 'eager volunteering' factors, respectively) and finally the type and amount of their

interaction differed in content-based English classes in comparison with language-based ones. Taking the increasing popularity of content-based courses in academic contexts into consideration, this study is hoped to significantly contribute to the existing knowledge by informing interested readers of how CBLI affects the motivated behaviors of university students in general and particularly in EFL academic contexts where motivation is always a big concern. Furthermore, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, this is the first study on university students' motivation within the perspective of CBLI in Iran, a country with the largest number of university students per its total population. Finally, in this study, motivational factors are traced in later observations to see if any observed differences between content- and language-based classes still remain or conversely CBLI has transitory effects, if any at all. The following research questions guided the present study:

1. Did the motivational factors under investigation (i.e. 'attention', 'engagement', 'eager volunteering' and 'verbal interaction') differ in content-based and language-based classes? If so, how are they different?
2. Did the observed differences, if any, still remain between the two types of classes in later observations?

3. 1. Participants

A total of 72 participants contributed to this research. The participants were two groups of sophomore students in a university in Iran who had taken up English courses as a part of their B.S. requirements. The first class consisting of 37 students, were biology sophomores who were put into a language-based English class (LC class for short). The second group of students also included 35 sophomores, majoring in chemistry that formed the content-based class (CC). The average age in both groups was 22.

3. 2. Instruments

To gather information on the participants' motivated behaviors in LC (i.e. language class) and CC (i.e. content class), the observation scheme adapted and modified by Huang (2011) was used for the aim and scope of the present study tapped the same area of research as this researcher's did. This observation scheme was, in essence, a combination of COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) originally developed by Spada and Frohlich's (1995) and MOLT (Motivation Orientation of Language Teaching) classroom observation scheme by Guilloteaux and Dörnyei's (2008) that was modified by Huang (2011) so as to include those elements and categories which pertained to learners' motivated behaviors. Hence, those parts related to teachers' teaching practice or students' motivational strategies were removed from the final observation scheme exploited in this study.

3. 3. Procedure & Analysis

Each class was observed five times during the first semester of the educational year 2012-2013. The observations took place with a three-week interval which totally covered almost the whole semester. In each session of the observations, the researcher sat at the back of the class for the whole 90 minutes of the class time to take notes based on the observation scheme. Afterwards, based on the observation scheme, the collected notes were interpreted and put into appropriate categories for later analysis.

4. RESULTS

4. 1. Attention

As Figure 1 below indicates, while generally the amount of attention increased in both language and content classes (from 34 % in week 3 to 47 % in week 15 for language class and from 35 % to 68 % for the content class), by week 15 when the semester was about to end, the students in the content class paid much more attention than their counterparts in the language class (68 % vs. 47 %).

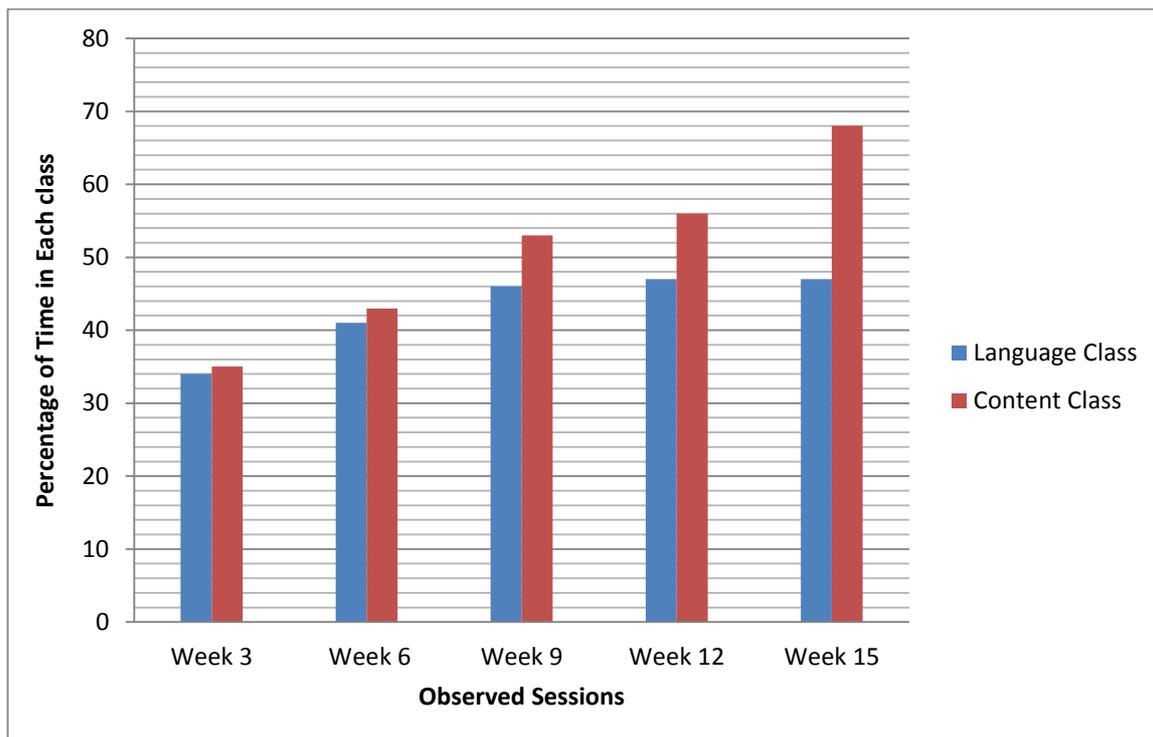


Figure 1. Learners' motivated behaviors: Attention.

4. 2. Engagement

Figure 2 shows the students' engagement in the language and content class. While in the first weeks of the semester (i.e. week 3 and 6), the difference between the two classes' amount of engagement was rather insignificant, as the semester went toward its end especially in week 12 and 15, the students in the content class became more engaged in tasks and activities in the class than those of the language class (37% language class vs. 51% content class in week 15).

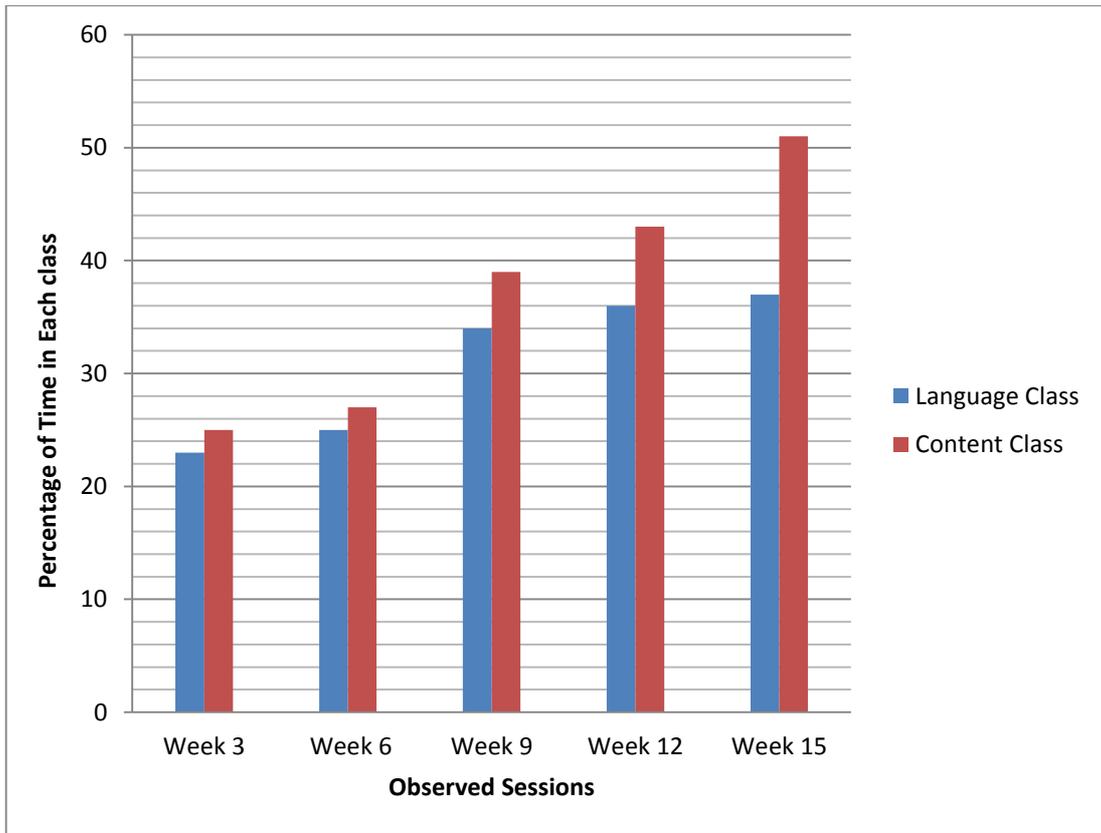


Figure 2. Learners’ motivated behaviors: Engagement.

4. 3. Eager volunteering

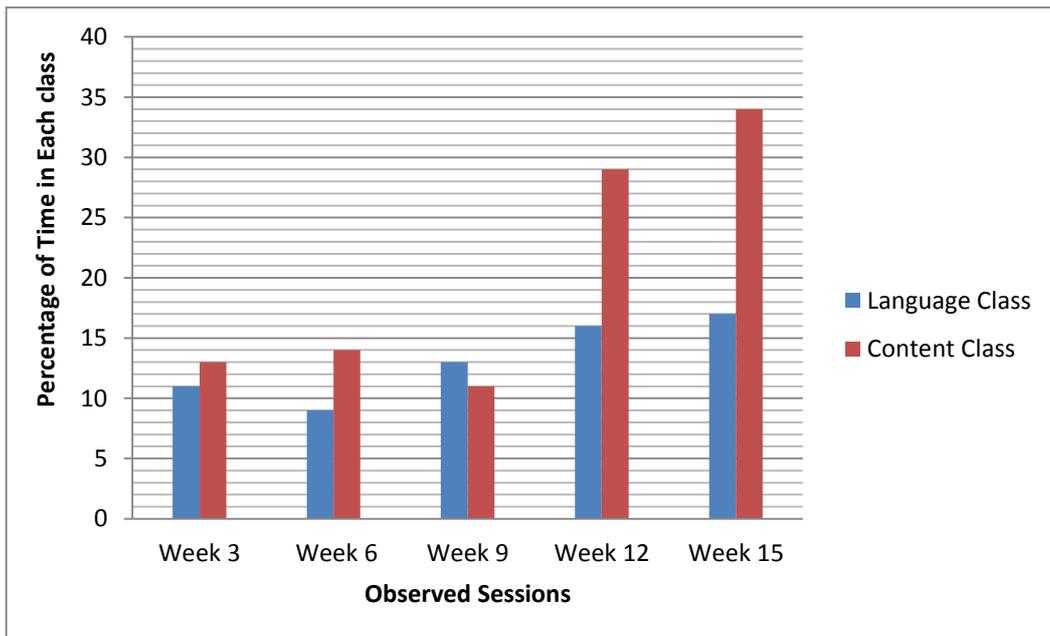


Figure 3. Learners’ motivated behaviors: Eager volunteering.

The same trend was repeated for the students' eager volunteering. That is to say, generally, the students in the content class outperformed their counterparts in the language class in volunteering for different tasks, activities or the instructor's questions. The only exception, however, is week 9 when the content class' level of engagement was a little less than that of the other class (i.e. 11% vs. 13 % respectively). This 2 % difference, however, only means less than 5 minutes of the 90-minute class time.

4. 4. Verbal interaction

Unlike the trend observed for the previous motivational factors (i.e. attention, engagement and volunteering), both language and content classes had almost the same percentage of classroom verbal interaction throughout the semester, that is, 54 % language class vs. 56 % content class (see Figure 4).

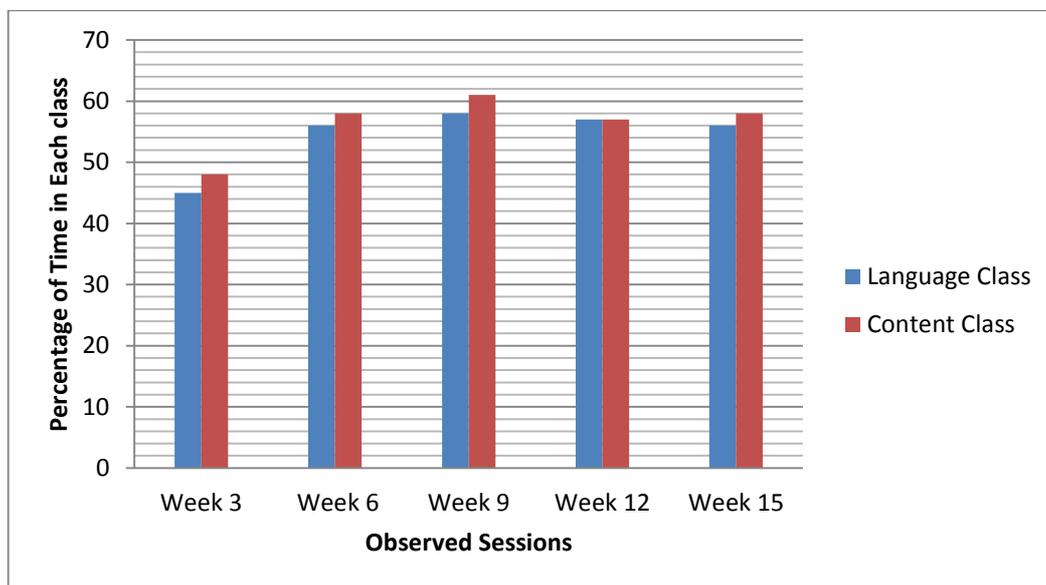


Figure 4. Learners' motivated behaviors: Verbal interaction.

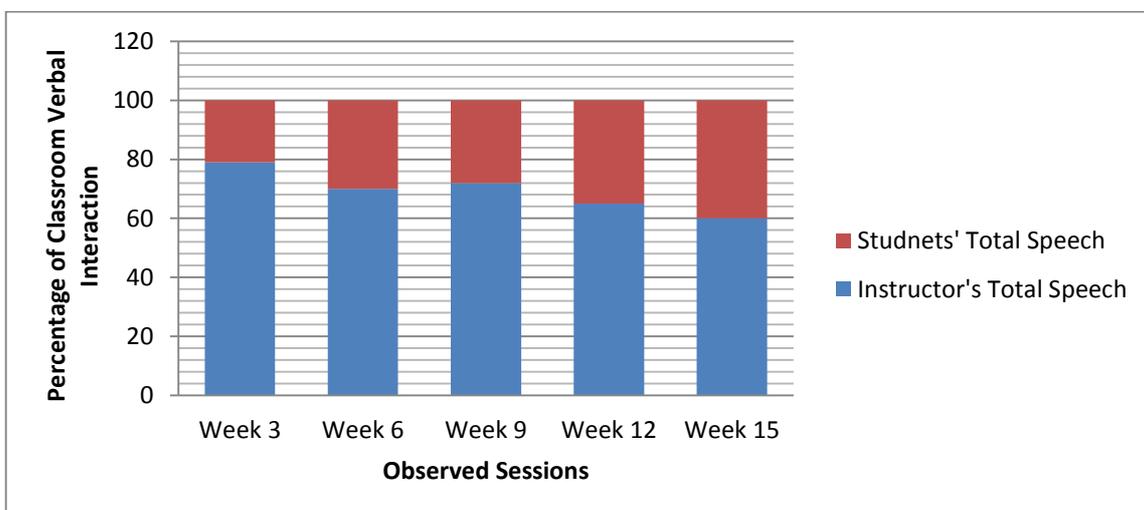


Figure 5. Instructor's and students' classroom verbal interaction: Language Class.

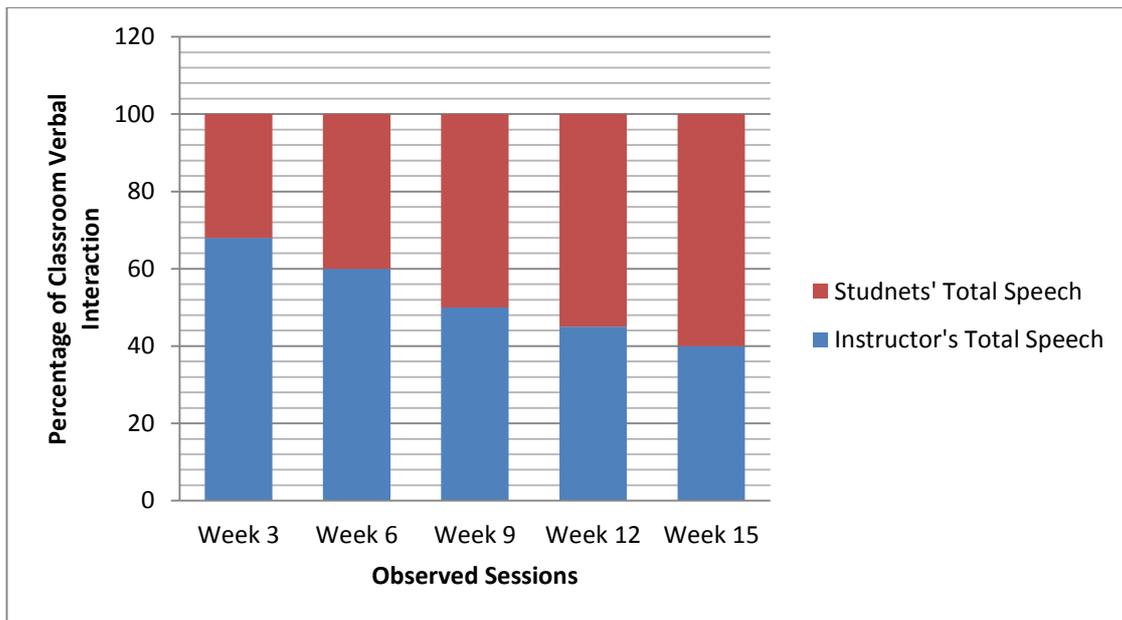


Figure 6. Instructor's and students' classroom verbal interaction: Content Class.

Yet, the researcher's further analysis revealed that despite this similarity, the students' total speech in the content class was more in comparison to that of the language class. In other words, while the total classroom interaction between the two classes was almost the same, the students' verbal interaction in the content class was much more during these five observations than that of their counterparts, that is, 47 % vs. 31 % respectively (compare Figures 5 and 6).

5. DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, the university students in the content-based class had higher levels of motivated behaviors in comparison with the students in the language-based class. They showed a higher amount of attention, engagement and eager volunteering. As for classroom verbal interaction, on the surface, both classes were the same. However, the students in the content-based class had much more contribution which is an indicator of a higher level of motivation in this regard (see Amiryousefi, & Zarei, 2011; Özgür, & Griffiths, 2013; Yaghoubi, 2013). Therefore, regarding the first research question, it seems that the class based on CBLI has been more successful in motivating students to pay attention, engage in and volunteer for class tasks and activities than traditional language-based classes.

The second research question explored whether or not any observed difference between the class types remained in other successive observations or had a transitory effect. Certainly, a constant pattern was to observe for CBLI to be regarded as a better alternative form a pedagogical perspective. The findings, on the whole, revealed that the motivated behaviors steadily increased in the content-based class while they were less and almost ceased to increase in the language-based one. Therefore, it seems that CBLI has been more successful both initially and in a long run (see also Garner, & Borg, 2005). Yet, due to the multifaceted nature of classroom as learning and teaching context, any generalizations should be done with care because, for one thing, while the findings of this study indicate that CBLI had been more

successful in attracting and engaging the students in classroom tasks and activities, they cannot be regarded as evidence for better learning and performance of the students in subsequent assessments without further research (Heidari-Shahreza, Dabaghi & Kassaian, 2012; Özgür, & Griffiths, 2013).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The present study investigated the possible effects of CBLI in comparison with traditional language-based instruction on four motivational factors: attention, engagement, eager volunteering and verbal interaction. The findings generally favored CBLI over the language-based instruction for all the motivational factors under investigation. That is to say, the university students paid attention, engaged in and volunteered for tasks and activities in the class more than their counterparts in the language-based class. In addition, they also contributed more in classroom verbal interaction. The findings of the present study imply that English-language instructors can benefit from CBLI in creating more opportunities for students to participate in classroom tasks and activities (see also Garner, & Borg, 2005). Moreover, since lack or low-level of motivation is always a big concern in EFL contexts (Yaghoubi, 2013), a content-based approach to language teaching seems helpful especially in academic EFL context where language and content can be more efficiently combined. Future studies can investigate the motivational factors explored in this study with participants at other levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, other studies may pursue the possible effects of CBLI for students at primary or secondary levels of education.

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