

Build active engagement with Contemporary Topics Online Classes

By Michael Rost



Content-based instruction (CBI) is a great way to increase student engagement and motivation as it allows acquiring language while learning content. In this article, Michael Rost, series editor of Contemporary Topics, explains how to utilize CBI and how to build active engagement with Contemporary Topics Online Classes

Content-based instruction is a *great* way to increase student engagement and motivation. Basically, content-based instruction, or “CBI”, means acquiring language while learning content – or *through* learning content.

CBI doesn’t necessarily involve using a curriculum with academic lectures — history, physics, economics, philosophy and so on. In CBI, the course content can be practical “how-to” demonstrations or current event documentaries or inspirational talks or pop culture events like films and music. The choices are virtually endless. What is important is that the content is *substantial* – it is appropriate, relevant and *worth learning* for your students.

The *Contemporary Topics* series has grown in parallel with the developments in content-based instruction and also through my own research on how students acquire language. Over the years I have grown to believe that CBI can accelerate language learning in a variety of contexts, and not just in academic programs.

The key reason that content-based instruction is so effective is that you are working with affective, cognitive, and social *engagement* at the same time.

Of course, it’s not automatic. Just using content as a basis for your course won’t guarantee success. In order for CBI to be successful, the instructor has to be flexible, and willing to create three conditions for success:

1. The content is *inherently interesting and relevant* to your students — or as the instructor, you must *find ways to make it more interesting and relevant*, through the framing of activities, grading of material, and supplementation with other media.

2. Activities are primarily *idea-focused* (rather than language-focused) and involve *discussion* to develop solicitation of others' views, critical thinking, and agreement or disagreement. If the course material that the class is using is not sufficient in these ways, again you as the instructor need to *expand* and *adapt* activities in order to develop more topic-oriented discussion.
3. Peer interaction is the *primary* means through which learning takes place. This interaction involves predicting, brainstorming, pair sharing, small group discussion of opinions, peer review of content, and original student presentations on meaningful topics, along with a format for feedback from classmates.

It may be impossible to achieve all of these conditions fully, but it is important to have these instructional goals in mind and to work toward establishing them in every class.

Because many English classes are now being taught online, instructors may feel limited, unable to achieve the learning conditions that they could achieve in live face-to-face classes. While it is true that face-to-face instruction is superior to some aspects of language learning, we can still achieve the same levels of successful learning in our online classes.

Most online class platforms, such as Google Meet or Zoom, operate in a similar fashion: The instructor enrolls participants and controls "the room", enabling what students see on their (computer/tablet/phone) screen. The instructor also sets up formats for students to participate either in whole group settings or in break out rooms. It seems foreign at first, but once you learn the mechanics of the online meeting (and realize that there's always more to learn!), you should be able to start teaching in much the same way you would conduct a face to face class. The essential advice for making this transition is not to worry about the limitations or differences, but simply to do your best with the realities of the situation you have!

Working with these principles, here are some practical suggestions for organizing and accelerating learning in **online-only classes** with *Contemporary Topics*.

1. Flip the classroom to allow for maximum interaction during live sessions.

Essentially, this means to have the students do as much listening and reading and practising *on their own before class*, so that you can use class time for coaching and interaction and student presentations and feedback.

One rule of thumb for flipping your class is to ask: Can this activity be done alone? (If so, be sure it's an individual assignment, not done during your online class meeting time.) Can this activity best be done in pairs or small groups? (If so, plan the activity for a "Break Out" session, in which the students work in pairs or small groups in an online meeting room.) Is this activity best done as a whole group activity? (If so, be sure to plan time for the students to work as a whole group, and be sure to give a specific task to the whole group, not just the presenter.)

[Here is a basic [formula for flipping the classroom](#) with Contemporary Topics.]

2. Consider yourself to be a coach for active learning.

A major part of the teacher's role, particularly in online learning, is to provide coaching. Coaching involves specific directions on how to improve skills, but maybe more importantly, coaching involves providing motivation to guide and sustain students in their language learning efforts and struggles.

Try to give at least one personal coaching tip to each student in each class. Try to include a coaching tip in each interaction you have with your students, especially if you meet only once a week.

[Here is a set of [coaching tips](#) that you can use with your own students.]

3. Prepare a menu of "core speaking activities" that you can do in break-out groups.

Although "variety is the spice of life" may be true for a lot of relationships, it definitely does not hold for online teaching. Because of the challenges — and the sheer time-consumption — of explaining and demonstrating the procedures for a new activity, it's most efficient to have a small number of "core speaking activities" that you *use again and again*. Just three or four "go-to activities" is all you need. If you have clear ground rules for the activities, you can just give minimal instructions, such

as, “Okay, let’s do our *Notes Review Activity* now in groups of three. Go to your groups now. You have 10 minutes.” Of course, you’ll need to spend time at the beginning of the semester to get the procedures right, but once things get going smoothly, *everyone will be grateful* for the time-saving routines you have created.

Aim to have at least three 5-10 minute speaking activities in each online class. These should be activities in which the students do all of the talking, with a clear task. In CBI, it’s very important to give students time to “process” and “own” the material — content-based teaching is definitely not all about being passive and receptive.

[Here are some [core speaking activities](#) that I use with *Contemporary Topics*.]

4. Use media supplements to complement the coursebook content.

Because it is important to keep the content in CBI alive and relevant, you will want to supplement the course material with media that will personalize the class. It doesn’t take a lot to achieve this effect. Even just one supplement every two or three class meetings can keep your course content fresh and motivating.

You can think in terms of sources you already know — such as TED presentations or YouTube interviews or Spotify songs or other pieces of media you have archived. (Hint: If you don’t have an archive of favourite sources to supplement units in *Contemporary Topics*, start one now!) Some popular sites that I use for supplementary material are *Newsela* and *Listenwise*. Just type in some topical words and you can find current content that is related to the course material.

Remember: The key with this type of supplementation is that you are using “authentic” sources that focus on ideas and events, not on language learning per se. They give *extra dimensions* to the content of the course. And remember also, you don’t need to use every bit of media as a thorough comprehension exercise. You’re trying to spice up the content of the class, trying to keep motivating your learners to engage more. Aim to arouse curiosity and generate insight.

Of course, you can *also* use language-related supplements. One of my favourites is *Quizlet* – it’s very fast and easy to create your own vocabulary quizzes for a unit. Add other terms that you think are useful. You can allow *Quizlet* to give you translations, definitions, and even sample sentences and graphics. All with a free account. Just create your quizzes and pass along the link to the students. They can practice in pairs, quizzing each other.

Just adopt an experimental mindset — and see what kinds of supplements “click” with your students. And of course, don’t be afraid to ask your students to suggest supplements or types of topics they’d like to learn more about.

[Here are some suggestions for [supplementary activities](#) you can use with *Contemporary Topics*.]

5. Emphasize student participation as a key component of success in the class.

It really can’t be emphasized enough that successful online classes require active student participation – via activities in break out groups, use of the chat and survey functions to respond to questions and ideas during classes, and preparation and delivery of individual and group presentations.

If intrinsic motivation – the students’ natural desire to learn – isn’t enough to infuse a sense of active participation in the class, don’t hesitate to introduce some extrinsic motivational forces, like grades, to give an extra push. I recommend having participation measures for every class, if possible, and certainly for every unit in course.

One ingredient of successful participation in *Contemporary Topics* is the preparation and delivery of individual presentations, which is the last activity in each unit. A few hints for maximizing the use of presentations:

1. To save time (yours and the students’), the instructor prepares a small set (2 to 4) of reliable resources for each presentation. By using just these known resources (which may be articles or videos that you have pre-screened), you can be more certain that the students are doing sound research, rather than simply finding any sources on the internet and asking your approval.
2. To allow for maximum use of student practice time, have every student prepare a presentation for every unit. Of course, you won’t have enough online class time for every student to present to the whole class “live”, but you can take advantage of free software like Flipgrid to have every student record and submit (after they are happy with their performance) their presentations. (If possible, you will also want to have students submit an outline for approval and comment by you before they do their presentations.)

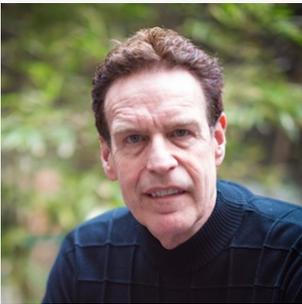
3. Because presentations in any format (live or recorded) are intended for a real audience, be sure that you and/or your students are viewing every presentation and giving some kind of substantial feedback. Develop a simple rubric that the audience can use to give feedback.
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These are some ways that you can promote engagement in classes in which you're using *Contemporary Topics*. The units themselves are organized to promote maximum participation and engagement, but it is up to the instructor to orchestrate the class and make decisions about timing, grouping, and supplementing the course material.

As I have mentioned, one thing that I am sure of is that content-based instruction can provide you with a flexible framework for engaging students, for creating a learner-centred course, and for achieving maximum progress.

Good luck!

About the Author



Michael Rost is the series editor of *Impact Issues* and other ESL/EFL series published by Pearson, including *English Firsthand* and *Contemporary Topics*. He is also the principle author of Pearson English Interactive, a four-level fully online course. Dr. Rost has written widely on language education, particularly oral communication development. You can access his academic publications at [Google Scholar](#).