



Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

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Welcome to the May/June edition of *TLT Interviews*! For this issue, we are excited to bring you an in-depth interview of Professor Donna Brinton. For over 30 years, she worked as a faculty member at the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of Southern California, and Soka University of America. Professor Brinton has also published extensively in the field of content-based instruction. Such works include *Content-Based Second Language Instruction* (1989), *New Ways in Content-Based Instruction* (1997), and *The Content-Based Classroom* (2017). Her most recent publication with Marguerite Ann Snow is *Content-Based Instruction: What Every ESL Teacher Needs to Know* (2019). Professor Brinton was interviewed by Michael Ellis, who is the EFL program coordinator at International Christian University High School in Tokyo, where he has taught for 10 years. His research interests include reflective teaching practice, project-based learning, fluency development, and awareness-raising of marginalized groups through content-based instruction. He is currently program chair of JALT's Teacher Development Special Interest Group. So, without further ado, to the interview!



An Interview with Donna Brinton

Michael Ellis

International Christian University High School

Michael Ellis: *You've written about a remarkable breadth of topics including materials development, content-based instruction, and teaching pronunciation. How did your interests come to span so much of the field?*

Donna Brinton: Kind of accidentally. The first thing that I did when I arrived at UCLA was to begin writing my own materials because there were pretty dismal materials out at the time. A colleague and I wrote a two-volume textbook for students entering the university. Then I started working in the field of Content-Based Instruction (CBI) because I got an offer to do this experimental program at UCLA with a colleague Ann Snow, who's

become my truest colleague in terms of co-writing and coediting books. She and I began working with this paradigm which didn't have any real literature at the time. We wrote an article about it, and we eventually got that accepted in *TESOL Quarterly*. It was just a research report, but we started thinking that maybe we could actually write a book about this. Marianne Celce-Murcia, who was my professor at UCLA, said there's this woman in Ottawa who's doing the same thing as we were. She's connected a language course and a psychology course. We met her at TESOL New York, and we started talking, and she said she would come to UCLA on her sabbatical to write the book with us. That's how I got into that field. Teaching pronunciation, again, I was just hired to teach a course and wasn't very happy with the materials. Another teacher began teaching that same course. We just started a notebook of resources that we could use, and that resource book then somehow made its way into a volume. I've always been a collaborator by nature. I don't do a lot of stuff on my own. I was never under tenure pressure at university because I was a lecturer. I've always just sort of been happy to work on projects that other people are interested in, but those areas have just become the areas that I've most invested myself in.

A lot of what you've shared about your story will ring true with TLT readers, arriving to the field before you're fully trained, then getting your footing and making

these critical friendships which help push you along the way. But one point of your journey which might be unfamiliar to a lot of us is your time working with the US State Department. Would you mind telling us a bit more about that?

It's a really unique opportunity within the US Department of State called "English language specialist." I was initially just recommended by another colleague at UCLA because he was unavailable for a particular assignment. They contacted me and that was the very first State Department assignment I ever did, in I think 1991. It's usually a two-week assignment, sometimes as long as six weeks. They match a need in a country with the local teachers of English to the expertise of people like myself. If they're looking for somebody who can train teachers who have a particular interest in the skill of pronunciation, they might go into their database of specialists and say, "Oh, Donna would be an appropriate person. Let's see if she's available during that time period." There is a range of stuff you can do as an English language specialist. In teacher education, you might work with more novice teachers or teachers who are not native speakers of English in a particular context on a particular project that they've identified they need help with. It might be a curriculum project. I did a lot of work in Uzbekistan with a group of teachers who were creating a teacher education framework, and went six times for two to three weeks each time. Then we also got funding to bring the teachers to UCLA to do a program in the middle of those six times that we visited them. Program evaluation is another thing you might be called upon to do. I've gone to places like Bolivia and done program evaluations of some of their programs. Sometimes, they just want a speaker who will go from conference to conference within the country. I went to Brazil and was taken all around the country and gave talks at the various teacher conferences, and the same thing happened in South Africa at one point. What that's done for me was probably more important than what I've done for the local teachers. I mean I don't want to say that it wasn't significant, and I think I have made an impact there, but for me as a teacher educator, it just means that I have face validity when I talk to my students, and I say, "Here's what it's like to be a teacher in Paraguay," "Here's what it's like to teach in Thailand," or "Here's what it's like to be a teacher in Argentina." I know the contexts in which people are teaching much better. I'm able to talk about things like world Englishes and all of those things. It's been a huge thing in terms of my professional development, probably more than any formal study that I've ever done.

In your plenary talk, you spoke about learner agency. You began with the metaphor of a pendulum, how methods move back and forth between promoting it and not. I couldn't help but question, is progress possible in this metaphor? Or are we really just moving back and forth with no goal?

I think that it's easy to sort of characterize that one swing of the pendulum that I was illustrating with audiolingualism as totally negative, and maybe my plenary gave that impression. I don't think that it's totally negative. I think there are things that came out of audiolingualism, things like even drilling which we sort of look down on today. But there are very positive aspects of drilling. It's a safe space for learners, especially in terms of pronunciation and speaking skills, to rehearse without someone looking at them critically. Even those other swings of the pendulum can bring about some interesting methods and techniques for language teachers.

You set up the question at the beginning, "Is learner agency just a buzz word?" And you ended with the conclusion that "No, it's not." As a devil's advocate, I'd like to ask you if you could imagine any contexts in which learner agency need not be promoted.

I really can't. It's something that, for example, when I was talking about audiolingualism as an approach that was not in any way concerned about learner agency, that was the most negative aspect of audiolingualism. It's why most of us today will say that's an approach that we no longer advocate, even if certain techniques that come out of that are still very much a part of our teaching. Taking that wholesale approach and applying it to our learners, we would never do. I think it would be really hard to think of a context in which learners need no agency whatsoever, and I think that's maybe one of the most positive things about teaching today and about the conference which we just attended. I went to so many sessions highlighting learner agency. I saw some amazing mini studies about individual learners or groups of learners who were definitely showing why this is so important.

I think that's quite powerful because over the past two days of the conference, I too have seen learner agency take on so many different forms, and sometimes I felt unsure of what exactly it means. There are so many different ways to approach it.

Absolutely.

However, if we can just accept it as a basic constant that all of our students need, perhaps that's a good starting place.

It is. When I was first asked to talk about agency by the organizers of the conference, I thought, “I don’t know what I can say about agency.” I really had to think hard how I would approach it from my area of expertise, and that’s why I thought to frame it with the swing of the pendulum and the different approaches that either did or didn’t integrate a focus on agency.

You brought up methodologies such as from audiolingualism and the soft method in your plenary. Today, many TESOL programs are moving away from methodology instruction, and looking at classroom practices more holistically. What do you think is the value today in learning these methodologies?

I still think they’re very important. Both of those things are important, the sort of nitty gritty of the classroom, how to plan activities, and how to carry them out. I spent thirty years doing the teaching practicum. I’ve also done a lot of work in that area. I have a chapter in a methods text called tools and techniques of effective teaching. But if we don’t know where we came from, and the kind of pitfalls that we can fall into as teachers, then we’re not able to get the larger picture. The underlying philosophy is so strong in some of those methods. Even though I would never embrace a wholesale Silent Way approach, there are things within that philosophy that really touched a chord with me. One of them is that teaching is subsumed to learning, which isn’t a principle of really any other technique, not a stated principle anyway. I think it’s an important part of learner agency.

You ended with some advice at your plenary by offering ways we could promote learner agency. You listed things like creating a culture of inquiry and creativity, and fostering collaboration skills and learning strategies. When I heard that, it resonated with me, but when I tried to come up with specific applications, I was coming up more or less blank. Could you give some specific examples of how teachers can achieve this?

I’ll give one concrete example. One year, we were adjuncted to political science, and the professor wanted the students to critique their Marxist orientation to society, how they were products of the dominant beliefs in society. All of our students were first generation immigrant students who thought America is the most wonderful place in the world. It’s the land of freedom. The professor was asking, “How have your personal experiences shaped you as an individual, and how have these societal pressures shaped you?” Our students were just totally unprepared to do that, and what’s more, they knew that they didn’t really like what this professor was saying,

but they weren’t able to put their finger on why this was bothering them. Why it was bothering them was that his politics were so different from theirs, so we had to find a way, and we created a case study of a person who showed all the influences, where this person had grown up, all the influences that had melded them into the person they were. I said, “Go home and use this framework that I have created to talk about this individual, but do it for yourself.” And that really helped give them the sort of schema for how they could attack that assignment. Sometimes, it involves a lot of schema building. It involves a lot of framing assignments for students to get them to the point where they’re even able to think about it.

That example helps me a lot to understand because I hadn’t considered that we should talk about the target content in that skill development. Is it fair to say you need to utilize the content to support those goals?

Oh yeah.

As language teachers we tend to have preferences. “I’m better at teaching language OR content.” CBI is something that you’ve written quite extensively about. This is an approach that has been gaining popularity in Japan for some time, especially at the university level, but there are often problems with specific applications. For this reason, I think it might be useful to ask you as an expert some questions about content-based instruction to clarify what it is and what it isn’t. First, just very broadly, what factors do you identify as necessary to call something a content-based approach?

There are lots of variations in CBI, and I’ll go through the three basic models. The theme-based curriculum, which is a form of content-based, is probably the most generalizable one. It’s the one that you see in all of the textbooks that are on the market. When I started teaching you opened the pages of your textbook, and it said, “Chapter 1: The Present Tense, Chapter 2: The Past Tense...” Today, you open it up and it says, “Chapter 1: Robotics, Chapter 2: Extreme Weather, etc...” The theme becomes your content, and you use that as a carrier topic and then integrate all of the language instruction including skills, not just grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, but also, reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking, culture—whatever you think is important for your learner population.

The second is the sheltered model, which is one that we use a lot in the US. A content teacher is responsible for language development, but there is a much heavier focus on content than on language, whereas in the theme based one it’s a heavier focus

on language rather than content. In a theme-based curriculum, students aren't really being held responsible for robotics; they're just acquiring language skills in order to talk about something that maybe is relevant, interesting, and meaningful in their lives. In sheltered, these are courses that students are actually taking. This approach is most common in high schools for students who don't speak English as their first language. They're all in a specially designated course, like sheltered biology, and the teacher has special training to work with language minority students. That's again a combination of language and content, but it's that sliding scale so there's more focus on content and more incidental focus on language. In the final model, the one I have the most experience with, adjunct model, you've got an equal focus on both because you have two teachers. You have a language teacher and a content teacher. But it's really essential in any one of these forms that there is an overlap between the language and the content. If it doesn't have content, it's not content-based instruction, and if it doesn't have some kind of language focus, then it's just a content course. Think of the Venn diagram. There's that piece in the middle, and that's what makes it the content-based course.

Could you explain where CLIL fits in this?

A couple of years ago, Ann Snow and I came out with a second edition of this book we called, *The Content-Based Second Language Classroom*. We were able to do a lot of updates and make it a lot more international in context. We got a lot of international authors talking about how they're doing content-based instruction, and we were very aware that one of the first things that we had to do was figure out how the CLIL people and we could come together on this question on how CLIL and CBI are related. We were very lucky to find an eminent CLIL practitioner, Christiane Dalton-Puffer, who said she would be willing to work with us, and she saw CLIL as a variant of CBI, or as belonging to the bigger content and language integrated instruction paradigm. We drew this new map of content-based instruction. It's in the volume, and we discussed at length where we felt CLIL belonged on the map. We had originally drawn it as a part of sheltered instruction, and she felt that it deserved its own branch under the bigger rubric of content-based instruction, so we all came to agree on that idea. It's a much newer approach than some of the other approaches. It originated on its own, not so much influenced by content-based instruction because it began in the European Common Union, and the basic idea of global citizenship was at the foundation

of implementing CLIL programs in Europe. That's quite different from why a lot of content-based courses developed, so that may be one of the main differences—the goals and purposes of the program may be quite different.

Another one might also be that CLIL can be pretty intentionally introduced. Maybe the very first year, the students take one course in their second language, by year two maybe an additional course is added. It also substitutes for more traditional foreign language courses, so it takes the place of that, but in content-based instruction, especially if you think about the sheltered context, where we've got thousands of students in a given school district in the US who don't speak English as their home language, and they're coming into the school system with different degrees of proficiency, and the school system has to find some way of dealing with these students. The way that they've dealt with it is to put them in these sheltered classes in all of the content areas. If it's a large school district like where I live, Los Angeles unified school district, there's something like 97 different home languages of the students who are in that school district, and they have to find ways to deal with these students because otherwise they would all drop out of school. So it's not intentional, it's not carefully planned like CLIL is. That's maybe another difference.

What are the major benefits of a CBI approach?

I think that the whole communicative language paradigm under which we could put content-based, the obvious strengths are this idea of authenticity—authenticity of materials, authenticity of tasks, the relevance of what the students are learning to their real lives, and their real interests. Content-based instruction, if done well, can feed into that and make for a really rich learning environment. The potential is great. However, you need to understand that in a textbook, just because it's a content-based textbook, those chapters that have been developed by some author for maybe a completely different population may not be so engaging for the students, and that might be one of the weaknesses of that approach. I think that the sheltered and the adjunct don't suffer those same weaknesses as much as, for example, theme-based instruction does. I'll give you a real, concrete example. I was doing one of my state department assignments with a group of teachers from Kurdistan. I was in Erbil which is the northern part of Iraq. I was supposed to be training them in content-based instruction. They said, "Oh yeah, our textbooks are all content-based." True enough, their units were all content-based texts, but they hadn't been written for Iraq. They

had been written for, who knows, Brazil or some completely different context. I said, “How did your learners react to these themes?” And they said, “Sometimes yes, sometimes no.” I said, “Can you name some of the units that don’t work well with your students.” Everyone in the room said, “The one about railroads.” I said, “Well why in particular that one?” These were middle school students. “Well we don’t have any railroads in Iraq.” That’s just a kind of classic example.

You’ve mentioned that as one challenge of CBI. Are there any others which teachers should be aware of?

Probably the biggest one is the supposed inability of content-based to focus on form. One of the things I keep going back to is this original quote by Dave Eskey, where he says content-based instruction comes down hard on the side of fluency, but in terms of accuracy, it’s not an effective way of dealing with it. I completely disagree with that because I’ve done so much work on integrating a focus on form into content-based instruction, and I think maybe it could be the most powerful way of introducing focus on form. I’ve written textbook series that are content-based for advanced learners in the university context in which we very intentionally in every chapter introduce vocabulary-oriented activities and grammar-oriented activities that spun off of the content, and looking at readings where students could identify certain structural elements in the readings.

I think it probably goes both ways in that you might have an affinity for looking at forms, and be reluctant to bring the content to the forefront. This might be a stereotype for Japanese teachers of English. Likewise in David Barker’s plenary, he said, “I’m not just an English teacher” is what teachers who aren’t even English teachers say, because they don’t know how to teach the language. They can only teach content. Can you think of any general approaches for bridging the gap? How can we convince teachers who like teaching form to teach meaning, and teachers who prefer teaching meaning to teach form?

I think the best way to do that is to get them immersed in an environment where they can see it happening. It may just be a series of videos that they watch, but even better, if you can get them to see this happening live. I do a lot of demos in my teacher education course. I just did one the other day, I’m teaching a short course on content-based instruction, and I did a whole demo on theme-based where I said, “Now you’re my students. You’re my middle school students, and we’re going to do this unit.” That way they could see how I integrate

language into our theme, which was, “What is a friend?” It was aimed at middle school students. We did the whole unit, and typically what we would do is say now let’s debrief about it. I’ve done projects with content professors where we asked them to develop a unit and to show the other teachers what they’ve been able to do. Sometimes just prescribing, here’s what we want you to do, we want you teach content for ten minutes, but we also want you to focus on two language features in your discussion. A couple years ago, I did a program at Toyo University with content teachers who were asked to teach through EMI (English-Medium Instruction). We had two weeks together, so that was a great opportunity for them and for me to get to know the issues they were struggling with it. There is no easy way of doing it, but I think the best thing is immersion into a context where this is really happening, and then debriefing after the experience.

So open doors, have the experience, maybe baby steps, and then reflect afterwards?

Yeah, yeah yeah.

That’s powerful.

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