



## Of Cows, and Cowards, and Content-Based Instruction: The Six-Ts Approach to Literature

*Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear, seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.* (William Shakespeare in the play *Julius Caesar*)

### From Cows to Content

Shakespeare's words about human mortality were the first English utterances I heard as I entered Miss Eleanor Steadman's English class at Bosse High School in Evansville, Indiana. I knew perhaps 200 words of English. I was 16 years old and had already lived in three languages. The year was 1952. My passport said "DP," meaning "Displaced Person," and as the bard's immortal words floated incomprehensibly through my perplexed consciousness, I indeed felt displaced, misplaced, dislocated, disoriented, and totally unhinged.

I understood the word "death." I knew the word "fear" though not in its verb form, and I guessed that "coward" must be some form of domestic livestock. Thus, I assumed that I might be in the midst of a discussion of slaughterhouses and tried to give it my undivided attention.

Miss Eleanor Steadman was a superb teacher. She read my face, and she read my trepidation, and she knew what to do. In an instant, I was experiencing contextualized language instruction. The scales fell from my eyes. It was comprehensible input all the way. I not only understood English; I tasted Shakespeare. Then and there I also made my career decision. I, too, would someday do for others what Miss Eleanor Steadman had done for me.

"Donald," said Miss Steadman, "Natalie doesn't understand what you have just read. Do you think that you could act it out for her?"

"Sure!" said Donald, whom I later got to know as the school's chief Thespian, as he bounded to the front of the class.

"Cowards," he said as he performed a highly dramatic shudder. "Cowards are people who are afraid. They die [he slit his throat] many times—

many times before they really die, because they are afraid of dying. The valiant ones [he carefully repeated the phrase] . . . I mean those who are brave, not afraid [with a lot of head shaking], they only die one time. [Donald held up one finger to demonstrate]. But why be afraid? Everybody has to die, right?"

Donald bowed modestly and returned to his seat accompanied by warm applause in which I was an enthusiastic participant.

From then on, we worked our way through the murder plot, the struggle for democracy, the bite of ambition, and the meaning of friendship, all packaged into the famous drama. The students, together with Miss Steadman, created comprehension for me by drawing, acting, simplifying, gesturing, repeating, elaborating, and associating. On my own, I used my Swedish-English dictionary until it was a tattered and frayed heap of loose papers. I graphed; I made vocabulary cards; I categorized. Mostly, I was in love with Shakespeare. Cassius, Brutus, Calpurnia, Caesar, and Anthony left the printed page and became suffering human beings very much attached to the concerns of the real world, and by the end of the semester, my own world seemed much more manageable.

### **The Six-Ts Approach to Content-Based Education**

Throughout my career as an EFL/ESL practitioner, I have tried to create such a "more manageable world" for my students. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to describe an eight-week content-based language course that I taught at CESL (Center for English as a Second Language), a preacademic program at the University of Arizona. The specific method—the Six-Ts approach to content-based instruction—lends itself well to making both language and content meaningful and manageable. It is a conceptual framework devised and developed by Stoller and Grabe (1997). The approach offers a program that is built around *themes*, rooted in *texts*, illuminated through *topics*, stitched together by *threads*, internalized through *tasks*, and moved along by *transitions*.

- *Themes* are broad-based, language-rich subjects of interest. These extensive subjects can be expanded into many topics. For example, if the theme is "family," we could extend it into topics such as "single-parent families," "nuclear families," "extended families," "divorce," or "adoption."
- *Texts* are all the language-based materials used to promote language learning. A written piece is a text, as is a film, a recording, a picture, or an object that brings about language learning.
- *Topics* are those divisions within a theme mentioned above.
- *Threads* are links that tie themes to other related themes. For example, the theme of "family" could quite readily be tied to such themes as "belonging" or "social norms."

- *Tasks* are the strategies through which a teacher introduces, activates, and reinforces knowledge. A group report, a poster project, a dictation, or a ranking activity are all tasks.
- *Transitions* are means through which topics are connected to one another as well as to the central theme, or ways through which themes are connected to other themes.

Interest in content-based language instruction, as Snow and Brinton (1997) note, has widely expanded since the publication in 1986 of Bernard Mohan's seminal *Language and Content*. With greater interest in the field there is also greater complexity. At the university level, adjunct courses are flourishing and constantly being reexamined (Adamson, 1993; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Hess & Ghawi, 1997; Hess & Morton, 1996). At the elementary and secondary levels, content-based language instruction is widely practiced and found useful (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987, 1994; Echevarria & Graves, 1998; Shrun & Glisan, 1994; Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). In EFL settings, it finds increasingly more proponents (Hones, 1999; Murphy, 1997; Shih, 1999).

The concept of content-based language instruction featured prominently in many of the presentations during the 2000 TESOL International Conference in Vancouver. Among these were the CALLA (*Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach*) and its later interpretation in the Forsee method—"4 C"—Communication, Cognitive academic language development, and Content Instruction in the Classroom (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

I have found the Six-Ts approach so valuable because it crosses levels and situational boundaries, is useful in a multitude of educational settings, and lends itself well to the mixed-ability classroom so common in the K-12 programs. The Six-Ts approach offers me a flexible program through which I can create a more manageable world for my students.

### **The Course I Taught Using the Six-Ts Approach**

The course was an eight-week, preacademic, advanced-level literature class. In the class were 16 students from seven language groups and of ages that ranged between 17 and 58. Among them were three young women from Yugoslavia, a young man from Turkey, an older woman from Greece, two middle-aged men from Saudi Arabia, three young Japanese men, and seven young women from Mexico. Most of my students planned to study at American universities as soon as they passed their TOEFL exams. The woman from Greece was there to improve her English while her husband worked on a project at the University of Arizona.

We met for two hours daily five days a week. No textbook had been set for the course and I was, therefore, free to choose my own texts and plan my curriculum. Although the class was primarily a reading-speaking class, I hoped to practice as much integration of all four skills as possible.

### ***Making a Needs Assessment and Setting Goals***

I began with a needs assessment that in spite of its simplicity usually helps me to feel the pulse, energy level, and needs of a group of students. I ask students to use a slip of paper on which to complete the following sentence: "In my opinion, this course will be a success if \_\_\_\_\_."

Students complete the sentence and put their slips in the bag that I provide for collection.

They then pick a slip written by another classmate from the bag. In small groups, students talk about what is on the slip they found and how these ideas compare and contrast with their own, while I simply circulate and listen. I have found that talking through the ideas of another person helps students to voice their own concerns, and while I circulate, I can quickly learn just what students need and expect from the course.

What I learned from this activity was that students were anxious to express their opinions in good English, that they wanted to increase their vocabularies, that they wanted to read with greater speed and accuracy, and that they worried about not being able fully to express their personalities in a troubling and difficult language. I wanted this course to be student-centered. I wanted to foster student self-reliance. I wanted to help students to expand their vocabularies, to earn more confidence with their spoken language, and to increase their ability in reading both intensively and extensively.

### ***Choosing the Theme***

A theme, as Stoller and Grabe (1997) tell us, is a central idea around which the curriculum can be organized. I searched for a theme that would create depth of meaning and experience for my students. I chose "Decisions" because of its universality and because I discovered echoes of it in almost all literary selections.

### ***Choosing the Texts***

I chose five genres of literature as my texts: a poem, a short story, a play, a novel, and two films. The poem was Robert Frost's classic "The Road Not Taken." The story was James Joyce's "Eveline." The novel was *Accidental Tourist* by Anne Tyler together with the film by the same title; and the play was Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* in both its script and televised versions.

In Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," a man walking in autumnal woods faces two almost identical roads, and he chooses to follow the one "less traveled by," which makes "all the difference." The meaning of the poem is echoed in the regretful tone of the title "Road *Not* Taken" rather than "The Road *Taken*." The woods, in their profusion and their ability to confuse a wanderer, are a perfect metaphor for life. The autumnal atmosphere makes this decision one taken later in life, and the choice of a road "less traveled by" pits conformity against individualism.

"Eveline" by James Joyce features a young woman who must choose between deserting her family, defying her father's wishes, and shirking her

responsibilities, or making the choice in favor of what might be a better life with the boyfriend who has promised to marry her in Argentina.

*The Accidental Tourist* by Anne Tyler showcases Macon Leery, a hero, who has been propelled into career, marriage, and divorce through the desires and energies of others and who never, really, had to make a decision on his own. At the climax of the narrative, the indecisive Macon finally faces a life-transforming decision.

*All My Sons* by Arthur Miller is about a wrong moral decision made under the tremendous pressure of war and opportunity. The decision haunts a man and his entire family for the remainder of their lives and, most likely, into unborn generations.

### ***Considering the Possible Topics***

The fictional material I had chosen seemed to burst with topics that tied directly into the central theme. Such topics were:

- Career choices
- Marriage and divorce
- Travel decisions
- Choice of residence decisions
- The having and rearing of children
- Moral and ethical choices
- Social-situation choices
- Health-care choices

### **Planning the Course and Organizing a Syllabus**

As I planned the course, I constructed threads from topic to topic and text to text by constantly reentering the central theme through reading, writing, speaking, listening, and vocabulary recycling activities. My transitions, according to the Stoller and Grabe model, could have helped me to move to different themes, but since I found the theme I had chosen so rich, I used the transitions to explore and revisit topics at greater depth. I would like to draw the reader's attention to the chart that sets out the entire course plan in the appendix of this paper.

### ***Starting the Unit by Exploring Its Theme***

We began the unit by creating a timeline of an average human life. Along the timeline we plotted the decisions that most people have to make as they progress through life. In small groups students brainstormed and came up with ideas such as:

- Whom to choose for friends;
- What university to attend;
- What profession to choose;
- How and where to continue one's education;

- Whom to marry;
- Whether or not to have children;
- Where to live;
- How to spend money;
- How to plan retirement.

Each one of these ideas became a subsequent topic for journal writing and group discussion. Students also wrote and talked about a good decision and a problematic decision in their own lives. We talked about why decisions are so difficult to make and came up with the following ideas. Decisions are difficult to make because:

- A decision can change your whole life;
- You have to take responsibility for your decision;
- What you decide might hurt other people;
- Whenever you choose one thing you have to give up something else;
- You never know the outcome of your decision;
- You might spend your life regretting the decision you made;
- You feel like such a fool when you are wrong;
- You just don't know what to do;
- Everyone tells you something different, and you don't know whose advice to take.

### **Maintaining Momentum Through *Texts, Tasks, Topics, Threads, and Transitions***

#### ***Working With the Poem and the Story***

It seemed natural to make the transition into Robert Frost's poem. We looked at pictures of New England woods from *National Geographic*, and we paraphrased the poem into everyday English prose. We read the poem intensively, analyzing it line by line, visualizing both the described autumnal landscape and the mental landscape of choices and decisions. We talked about the possibilities for roads less traveled by—meaning decisions that are different than those made by most people. The *topic* struck a note in this group of students, who had all chosen “a less-traveled road” by deciding to move away from friends and family to a foreign culture and a foreign environment. Some had chosen to marry people outside of their own cultures, and they shared the pain and ambivalence of such decisions. Others talked about members of their families who had chosen “roads less traveled by” through career choices.

We created a *transition* into the story of “Eveline” through the *task*-based activity of “circle talk.” In this activity, students form a double circle. The inside-circle students face outward and the outward circle students look inward, facing a partner. The outside-circle students speak first for one minute, while their inside classmates display behaviors of good listening but remain silent. The outside students then move one step to the right, face a new partner, and speak about the same topic, but this time for two minutes.

The outside-circle students move to the right once again to talk to yet another partner, but this time for three minutes. The jobs then switch with the outside people as listeners and the inside-circle students as speakers. The *topic* given for the circle-talk *task* was “a time when I disagreed with my parents.” The topic worked as a *thread* into the story of Eveline.

We read Joyce’s story both intensively and extensively. Crucial paragraphs were read in class and discussed both in small-group and whole-class format.

Other longer sections were assigned for homework. Eveline is caught in a dead-end job where each day is laden with humiliation and frustration. Her circumstance brought us to thoughts about jobs and careers. Students brainstormed career expectations and arranged them in order of preference. Since Eveline was forced to make her decision based on whether her strongest need was to do things for herself or for her family, we used a continuum line on which students placed themselves somewhere between loyalties to self or to family and then explained their reasons for the placements. Since we assumed that Eveline might leave home, we wrote missing person’s announcements for her. Students who enjoyed drawing drew pictures to accompany the announcements. We also wrote the letters Eveline might have written to her father, and the responses he might have given, and as a *transition*, we compared and contrasted Eveline with the man who walked in Robert Frost’s woods.

### ***Working With a Novel***

In our second week, we entered the complex and multileveled world of the novel—*The Accidental Tourist* by Anne Tyler. A novel is best introduced through a series of schemata-building activities that will allow students to form a mental map of the narrative landscape they are about to enter. I introduce the students to the main characters by giving a brief description of each and asking for volunteers to come to the front of the class to act out the parts. We read the opening pages and watched the opening scenes of the film for comparison. As we progressed through the novel, we read it both extensively and intensively.

Students had to be prepared for extensive reading and shown how to read without looking up every word. Before each reading assignment, I briefly summarized the content, leaving a few cliff-hanging surprises to be discovered during the reading. I also created 10 questions in the form of “Ideas to Think About” for each chapter. The “Ideas to Think About” were, as a rule, tied to the central *theme* of decisions and related to the *topics* that were of interest, thus serving as *threads* for the unit. Each day’s assignment

**Figure 1**  
**Circle Talk**





consisted of having to answer 5 of the 10 questions in writing. In addition, each student chose a passage or paragraph that he or she wanted the class to talk about. I, too, chose such a passage. These passages became our intensive reading sections.

The *tasks* that helped us to *transition* from chapter to chapter were “the walk-about” and the “slip exchange.” In “the walk-about,” I posted the “Ideas to Think About,” each written on a slip of paper, on the walls around the room. Students walked about the room with a partner, discussing the ideas. If time allowed, they circled the room again with a second partner. In the “slip exchange,” each student was handed a slip of paper on which one of the “Ideas to Think About” had been written. Students mingled, talking with classmates about the idea and listening to their partners. They then traded slips and moved on to another partner and continued doing so as long as there appeared to be high interest in the activity.

Each day, we also looked at a scene from the film and compared and contrasted it with how the same narrative had been treated in the book. We concluded each day with journal writing. In the journals, students wrote about their reactions to the novel and to class discussion. They asked for clarification. They expressed anger and/or frustrations, and they showed their enthusiasm. I started most lessons with a reaction to topics brought out in the journals. Thus, the journals served us as an important *task-based thread* in the unit.

### ***Working With a Play***

Working with a drama is different from working with any other type of literature. A play should really be experienced, not read. Thus, when we read it, we become actors, directors, scene designers, and producers. The scenery, props, gestures, and facial expressions are as important in drama as the words being said. Paradoxically, such a conundrum allows for tremendous possibilities for language work since everything can be analyzed for what it would mean had it been said in a different tone, in a different place, with other props, and with a change of facial expression.

To introduce the play *All My Sons*, I dictated the first few lines without giving students a hint of who the speakers were and where the conversation was taking place.

Frank: Hya.

Keller: Hello, Frank. What's doing?

Frank: Nothing. Walking off my breakfast. That beautiful. Not a cloud.

Keller: Yeah, nice.

Frank: Every Sunday ought to be like this.

Students talked about who Frank and Joe might be, their appearance, age, and dress, and where they were at the time of the conversation. The vastly different images showed us how much we needed the visual aspects of drama. As we read the detailed stage-set instructions, our class artist did a



skillful blackboard drawing of a backyard of an American home of the period, and we were set to continue the drama.

We read the drama in much the same way as we had the novel but added the assignment of a daily scene to be dramatized. The same scene was assigned to each group of students, and it was interesting to note the different interpretations of the same material. Since we had a whole week for each act of the play, we were also able to use the televised version more intensively. We used the sound of the play with the television set turned away from the students so that they could actually follow the lines in the text as the actors said them. We also used the picture without the sound while students attempted to recreate what had been said. As in the novel, our class discussions and journal entries tied into the *topics* that reflected our central *theme*.

### **Description of the Most Useful Routines Used as *Tasks***

Throughout the unit, I used routines as *tasks*. I define a routine as a task that is so versatile that it can be used over and over again, each time with different content. Such use of routines brings a sense of comfort and continuity to the students. The routines described here are the most versatile and useful since they can be used on any level with any topic, for prereading and postreading; for preview as well as review.

#### ***Messenger Dictation***

Several copies of a fairly short (no more than half a page) text are posted on the wall outside of the classroom. Students sit in pairs; each pair consists of a messenger and a secretary. The messengers go out and study the posted texts, committing as much as they are able to memory. They return to their secretaries as fast as possible and dictate what they remember. The secretary writes while the messenger dashes out to get a new piece of text. Periodically, the messenger and the secretary switch roles. As soon as one pair has finished, the original text is brought in to be checked and talked about.

#### ***Student-to-Student Dictation***

Students choose a topic that has recently been read about or talked about; the teacher can also choose the topic. Students divide a paper into three columns and head the columns with the words *Agree*, *Disagree*, and *Not Sure*. A volunteer speaks a sentence related to the topic. Students write the sentence in one of the three columns, depending on how they feel about the sentence. Another volunteer offers another sentence. The writing continues as long as interest is high. Then students stand and mingle. They meet classmates, read their sentences, telling classmates where they have placed their sentences and explaining why they did so.

#### ***The Timeline***

The teacher prepares slips of paper. Each slip has an event from the text being read written on it. Students are handed one slip each. They read their

slip and memorize it. Then they stand, saying their bit to others until they are able to form a line in which the events follow the order of the text.

### ***Posters***

In small groups, using magazine pictures, felt pens, and glue, students create posters that illustrate events from the texts being read. Each group presents and explains its poster to the rest of the class. Graphic Organizers such as 2-4 way Venn Diagrams for comparison and contrast also make useful and interesting posters.

### **Using Films as Unifying *Transitions***

Films are excellent sources of meaning-building clues, but a film, like any text, needs the careful insight and effort of a teacher to step out of its passive entertainment role and enter the realm of pedagogy. I have found that separating sight and sound in the initial viewing serves as a great motivator for language expansion.

Below are some of the techniques that work well. These can be used as *threads* that stitch the unit together through review, prereading, schema-building, or scaffolding exercises.

### ***Back-and-Forth Narration***

Students sit in pairs with one partner facing the screen while the other's back is turned to the set. The sound has been turned off. As the action on the screen moves forward, the viewing students tell their partners what is happening on the screen. Periodically, the partners switch. When the scene is over, small groups form to construct the text of what they have seen. The scenarios are read out to the whole class, and then the class looks at the scene with the accompanying sound.

### ***Inside-Outside Film-View***

The teacher creates six to eight specific questions about the scene to be viewed. The sound is turned off. Half of the class stands behind the television. Their job is to memorize half of the questions, while the rest of the class views the segment. When the scene ends, each student with questions asks a partner who has been watching to give answers. Students then switch roles. When the second segment is over, students, in small groups, reconstruct the text and later view it with the sound on.

### ***Creative Listening***

The television set is turned around so that students hear the sound but do not see the picture. When the scene ends, small groups of students piece together what they have heard. Students construct the visual aspects of the scene before viewing it.

### *Follow a Character*

Students view and listen to a short conversation between two characters. Half of the class takes notes on what one person says, the other half on what the second person says. (I let them listen a few times.) In pairs, students recreate the dialogue. They then switch listening roles and do it again using the same conversation. The second time around the conversation, is, of course, more fully re-created.

### **Examinations and Culminating Projects**

Both the midterm and the final examinations consisted of open-ended essay questions relating to the central theme. Students also produced a four- to six-page paper in which they compared their own processes for making life decisions with the decisions studied in the texts.

### **Reflection**

A conceptual framework such as the Stoller-Grabe Six-Ts approach gives a sense of organization and purpose to a unit and allows both students and teacher a reasonable structure for meaningful language work. It encourages a great deal of text-to-text and text-to-life crossovers, and thus generates a tremendous amount of language learning. The Six-Ts approach has worked well in literature, but I have also used it with a unit on American History and have observed K-12 teachers apply it to units across the curriculum. The method works well because it allows for sense, structure, and sociability—all essential elements to language progress. The approach has brought me just a bit closer to a meaningful pedagogy. The Six-Ts approach will, of course, not suit everyone, and the suggestions are offered here as a menu rather than a set meal. The judicious teacher will choose activities and sections that suit his/her temperament, class, and content. I have purposefully refrained from stating exact time limits for each activity, as these aspects of our teaching depend on class composition, mood, and resources. I do, however, warmly encourage colleagues to experiment with the Six Ts, as the approach encourages creativity within a well-formulated framework.

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## Appendix Plan for Course

<i>Week 1</i>	<i>Week 2</i>	<i>Week 3</i>	<i>Week 4</i>	<i>Week 5</i>	<i>Week 6</i>	<i>Week 7</i>	<i>Week 8</i>
<b>Theme: Decisions</b>							
<b>Texts</b>							
“The Road Not Taken” “Eveline”	<i>Accidental Tourist</i> Book and film Part 1 Chapters: 1-4	<i>Accidental Tourist</i> Book and film Part 2 Chapters: 5-10	<i>Accidental Tourist</i> Book and film Part 3 Chapters: 10-15	<i>Accidental Tourist</i> Book and film Part 4 Chapters: 16-end	<i>All My Sons</i> Play and film Act 1	<i>All My Sons</i> Play and film Act 2	<i>All My Sons</i> Play and film Act 3
<b>Topics</b>							
Good decisions and bad decisions Major decisions Regrets Money Family	Travel Divorce Crimes Animals Separation	Firsts Career Change Fears	Confession Holidays Education Snobbery	Weddings Relationships Beginnings and endings	Neighbors War and peace	Truth and lies Superstition Guilt and innocence	Responsibility Guilt and innocence Money
<b>Tasks</b>							
Continuum Circle talk Letter writing Diary writing Missing persons advertisement Role play Visualization Venn diagram	Rating list brain-storm Walk-about Dictacomp Messenger dictation	Pair/share 3-minute speech Find someone who	Letter to advice column Posters Circle talk Small-group discussion	Small-group discussion Listing preferences Letter writing	Small-group discussion Find the right context Role play Simulation	Small-group discussion Debate Role play	List-making Discussion Role play Group letter

<p><b>Threads</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk-about</li> <li>• Slip exchange</li> <li>• Vocabulary work             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Journal</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Cloze passage</li> </ul>					
<p>— Comparing and contrasting the poem with the story</p>	<p>— Back-and-forth viewing of film scene followed by discussion — Drawing — Bubble talk about travel — Comparison to “Eveline”</p>	<p>— Viewing of divorce request scene and comparing it with the one in the book</p>	<p>— Acting out the Thanks-giving scene and viewing the film version — Comparing family situation with that in “Eveline”</p>	<p>— Viewing the decision scene and stopping to predict Macon’s way out — Comparison and contrast with Frost’s poem and “Eveline”</p>	<p>— Acting out a scene — Following a scene in book with TV view turned off — Watching the scene — Comparing relationships with “Eveline” and <i>Accidental Tourist</i> — Comparing attitude toward money with that in “Eveline.”</p>
<p><b>Transitions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circle talk</li> <li>• Comparison of “Eveline” with Frost’s wanderer</li> <li>• Use of films</li> </ul>					