

Influences of Content-Based Instruction in the ESP Classroom

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Language learning curriculum that is primarily driven by content (content-based instruction) has gained support because teachers and students are able to see the practicality of language that is meaningful beyond grammatical viability. Serious ESP instruction also must consider the benefits that a content-based approach engenders. In this paper, internal and external factors are discussed as a means to provide ESP teachers with some broad principles to consider when thinking about designing materials with a content-based teaching perspective. Internal factors are simply those influences that are in the students' immediate environment, while external influences are those that are derived primarily from the students' (eventual) professional domain. The conclusions in this paper emphasize that structural linguistic elements in the classroom must be, at the very least, balanced with content, and that internal and external influences should be driving forces behind content-based curriculum development intended for the ESP classroom.

内容に主な重点を置く語学学習カリキュラム(コンテンツベースインストラクション(CBI))が支持を得てきたのは、教師と学生が、文法上の正確さよりも更に、内容が有意義であるという語学の実用性を認識できるという点にある。真のESPインストラクションに取り組むためには、コンテンツベースによるアプローチが持つ効果について考える必要がある。本論では、CBIにおける内外の要因を議論し、それによって、CBIの考え方に基づいて教材デザインに取り組むESP教員に対し、一般的な原則を提供する。内部要因とは、学生に直接関わる環境にあって、学生に影響を与える

ものである。一方、外部要因とは、学生の(将来関わるであろう)専門分野より主に導き出されているものである。本論の結論としては、クラスルームにおける言語体系的要素は、最低限、内容とバランスのとれたものでなくてはならず、また、内外両要因による影響は、ESPクラスルームのためのコンテンツベースカリキュラム開発の背景にある原動力であるべきであることに焦点を当てている。

The notions behind content-based instruction (CBI) complement objectives in settings where language is taught with a very specific purpose in mind. At the heart of CBI is the lofty ideal that language instruction cannot be devoid of the context in which it is presented, and moreover, that content rather than language structures should be the driving force in curriculum development (Erickson & Schulz, 1981).

This of course runs contrary to the past notion of allegiance to grammar proficiency as the primary objective behind language teaching. Such grammar dogmas dictate that language-learning curriculum should be built solely upon the foundations of grammar structures; meaningful language is at best a secondary concern. And, even though the number of soldiers supporting a “grammar-focused” approach is on the decline, there is still a subtle but persistent focus on grammar in a plethora of textbooks and other curricular materials. Such materials often feign allegiance to more functional and content-oriented approaches but fail to deliver the promised goods (Grabe & Stoller, 1997).

This is not to say that CBI advocates generally adhere to the idea that content is superior to grammaticality of language structures, but that form and content need to be integrated into language instruction. And, grammar exercises devoid of context and content are rendered less effective. Hence, content becomes the naturally selected element driving the development of curriculum (Grabe & Stoller, 1997).

In the realm of language teaching, one area where the role of content cannot be ignored is in the context of ESP. In the present discussion about CBI, we look at curriculum design from the angle of an ESP perspective. Obviously, in ESP settings the curriculum should be founded upon the subject area in which the students are majoring. If it is nursing, then concepts related to the medical field should have influence over the design of the instruction; if it is computer science, then computer science concepts should influence the design; if it is chemistry, then chemistry related concepts should influence the design, etc. With a specific subject-based concept in mind, the language teacher can begin the process of content-based instructional development. However, sound choices need to be made regarding what materials are appropriate to best assist language learners both in their present situation within the university and in post-graduation activities related to their area of specialization. Thus, it is imperative that ESP language teachers clearly identify what phenomena in the real

world offer them the most effective resources.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to isolate a few broad factors that can be considered as appropriate influences toward the design and development of materials for a content-based ESP approach. We suggest here that CBI in ESP should be influenced by both internal and external factors. In operational terms, internal factors are simply those factors that are generated from the environment in which the students and teachers find themselves while external factors are those factors that are generated from outside of that environment.

Internal Factors

Although there are many factors that could be labeled internal, we will focus on a few general ones here; hence, these concepts can be easily applied across various curricula in the ESP setting. At the outset, it is important to remember that content-based teaching is the primary consideration of this paper. There may be other important issues related to each element discussed here, but our goal here is to look at developing effective materials.

The first and undoubtedly one of the most important factors in the developmental process of content-based materials is the relationship between the materials and the activities of students. Any argument advocating one set of objectives over another would be rendered

impotent without consideration of the students who are receiving the instruction and whose lives will be directly affected. In fact, one of the primary tenets of CBI is the notion that it is the students who will benefit from CBI because they are using language that is meaningful beyond the walls of the language classroom. (With this said, however, it is also important to mention that students are not necessarily cognizant of everything that they need, especially when it comes to language learning. It is for this very reason that professional language instruction is a vital element of the coursework (Chenoweth, et al., 1983; Chaudron, 1988)).

While mulling over the needs of ESP students, language teachers must remember this weighty fact: These students have chosen to attend a particular university with a very clear specialization as their final objective, and they have voted for their intended career through the investment of time, money and location. In other words, they tend to be university students with very specific goals in mind from the first day they walk into the building. This goal will be altered and modified as they become more in tune to their chosen profession, but for most, the central objective of graduating in a specialized field will remain. Students' academic routines at the university, for the most part, revolve around this objective. It is imperative, therefore, that language teachers be cognizant of what kinds of activities students are in engaged in on a day-to-day basis, and moreover,

which (if any) of those activities at the university would be enhanced through the acquisition of additional language skills. For example, if students customarily read experimental data reports that are in English, the language teacher should consider using this knowledge to help design the curricular activities in the language-learning classroom. At this point, the consideration changes from what should be used in the classroom to how can this idea be incorporated into the classroom—which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Besides the students, a second internal factor that should be considered in the development of content-based curriculum concerns the activities of professors and other experts who students may work with or take courses from. These area-special experts often have a major influence in the enhancement and shaping of a student's knowledge base. In many cases, by working with these experts on a daily basis, students will make decisions that will have a direct effect concerning the very direction their lives will take. Hence, it is also important for language teachers to be aware of and in tune to how the area-special experts engage their students and with what kinds of activities. This kind of knowledge can assist the language teacher by giving him or her enough ammunition to design instructional materials that model cognitive activities as well as behavior models that students are accustomed to. For example, if students work in project teams in their other

classes, there is certainly no reason why the language teacher cannot group students into project teams in the language-learning classroom for various activities. Such activities, with proper preparation and execution, help students to gain understanding as to why such activities are important to them.

Yet another internal factor that should help to formulate what kinds of materials should be developed in the classroom concerns textbooks, software and equipment that students use in their courses and experiments. This knowledge can be especially useful to the language teacher as a means to incorporate activities that allow students to use the materials and equipment from their special field of study. It is important to understand that this is not a suggestion that language teachers attempt to become specialists in the chosen field of their students; rather, it is a suggestion that language teachers need to be able to operate effectively within the environment in which they find themselves, so they can provide instruction that takes full-advantage of resources that are available to students and in the process supply content that is meaningful to the students. So, whereas language teachers may want to teach the students useful and appropriate vocabulary for example, they need not have detailed understanding of all of the vocabulary from the content area. Rather, they should focus on commonplace specialized vocabulary and linguistic elements that help students use the specialized language

that they already possess, or that they are learning, or that will discover on their own. Part of the process of learning the discourse community-specific concepts (language included) is the discovery of those concepts.

The upshot here is that the internal factors that should affect curriculum design are the same factors that affect ESP students by providing them with the necessary learning to develop the cognitive compounds that comprise their vital background knowledge, which is what will serve them in their selected careers. In other words, the background information that the language learner possesses (and which is added to on a daily basis) is the same cognitive information that the language teacher is trying to access, expose, and embellish (Douglas & Selinker, 1985, Douglas, 2000). That is precisely why the language teacher needs to be so attuned to the environment of the student.

Thus, the overriding principle that affirms what kinds of content-based tasks should be incorporated in the classroom is whether or not the task allows the students to access, and/or build their own discourse domain. If CBI fails to shape this specific background knowledge, it indeed fails completely (Douglas, 2000). Thus, for the language teacher to reach out and touch that domain requires a general but clear understanding of the students' day-to-day activities within the university environment, not what is happening inside the language learning classroom but everywhere else.

External Factors

External factors are the factors outside of the present and prominent academic environs. Such factors should also serve to influence content-based ESP curriculum design.

Whereas, internal factors are associated with the language learner's discourse domain, external factors are more concerned with building upon the present state of background knowledge the learner already possesses. Within the university, the task of enhancing background knowledge may be addressed by specialists, but often language teachers are also looked to as providing links to the real world. The former (area-specific experts) generally focus on the content of real world tasks, the latter (language teachers) often focus on the conventions of real world tasks. This is not intended to slight the language teacher's role in any manner; conventions should be considered very relevant content in an ESP language learning setting. And, conventions are undoubtedly important to employers who are looking for not only qualified workers who can speak a little English, but workers who understand pragmatic applications of language (see Swales, 1990). Besides conventions, there are other resources that have the potential to positively influence CBI in an ESP setting; these influences can help to broaden a student's horizon and so provide the language teacher with useable information towards the creation of classroom materials.

Obviously the workplace is the principle external

factor that should influence curriculum design (as we have previously hinted). What kinds of tasks will the present students be doing once they graduate and find a job? The answer to that question, of course, is what ESP instructors ought to know; so, they can develop tasks to benefit the majority of students. We can look at an example from the business world. In business, e-mail is sent as a common form of communication. Yet, a great number of students, who practice sending e-mail every day to their friends, are completely unaware of what conventions are necessary to make an e-mail message appropriate for business. This lack of base knowledge results in a failure by students to understand the function of a text, the audience of a text, the visual and linguistic characteristics of a text, and the procedures necessary to construct an appropriate text. The role of teaching such elements is often left up to the language teacher.

Outside of knowledge that can be gained from workplace *washback*, other external influences are derived from professional resources. Teachers as well as students often have sufficient means to access information well beyond their present scope of knowledge and beyond what they will be taught in their specialized courses. Specifically, ESP language learners can have contact with highly trained professionals in their own field and communicate with those

professionals in English, or they can investigate new ideas and concepts at various websites, in newsgroup discussions or through other resources, all with the effect of enhancing and extending their knowledge background (Orr & Shinozaki, 1999). Additionally, the language teacher may uncover interesting and appropriate (related to the specialized subject matter) information presented in the target language (or materials which can be easily modified by the teacher or in some cases a subject-area expert) that expose students to real world applications that are newsworthy and thought-provoking. For example, if the language teacher is teaching English to nursing students, he or she may wish to have students watch a documentary about hospital care in the United States, or clip an article from a magazine that discusses the advantages and disadvantages of monitoring patients from remote locations.

Again, this paper merely touches on a few of the external influences that can aid the teacher in choosing content that will be successful in the classroom. Students' background knowledge and language skills will both be enhanced if the language teacher provides activities that allow students to discover new information outside their present world-view.

Concluding Remarks

CBI task construction in the ESP classroom, then, must be a balance between learning language and content with a demonstrable discourse purpose. Thus superior materials must incorporate (a) task understanding (are they sensible) (b) the use of appropriate language skills and (c) a means to access some aspect of the “real world.” These three provide an appropriate framework for acquisition of appropriate genre specific language skills.

Additionally, CBI in ESP may be perceived as a rather narrow, inflexible lens in which to view the parameters of curriculum development. However, many of the avenues to achieve the goal of presenting appropriate content, based upon internal and external influences, have not been explored in this decidedly short paper. As language teachers, if we become more informed about the objectives of ESP students, we will be able to uncover countless ideas that will provide them with access to appropriate content as well as excellent language learning opportunities.

It should also be mentioned that the summation of principles advocated here is done with the intent of affecting methods used to develop curriculum in CBI and ESP classrooms. Nonetheless, our goal here is not to pinpoint specific ideas; rather, it is to identify the kinds of influences that can be used as appropriate as

guides for curriculum development. This paper merely scratches the surface with broad brushstrokes.

Finally, and certainly of primary importance, is the notion that those who consider themselves as language professionals should be in the continual process of discovery themselves, to upgrade the status of the profession. In relation to ESP context, that simply means researching internal influences to determine what background knowledge students have and investigating external influences to determine what elements are useful in building upon this knowledge base, which cannot (or in some cases will not) be addressed by content-area specialists. As Swales (1990) so adroitly points out, it is vital to become more informed and more alert concerning the founding principles of any curricula. By focusing on internal and external factors at their universities, language teachers can help elevate ESP language teaching to a place where it can “rightly enjoy a settled and respected place in academic affairs” (Swales, 1990, p. 232). The ESP language teacher has a role to fill in the overall scheme of CBI; it is important to know that role well and fill the niche appropriately and professionally.

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