UC Berkeley
The CATESOL Journal

Title
Models for Content Based Curricula for ESL

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/62z073mp

Journal
The CATESOL Journal, 2(1)

ISSN
1535-0517

Author
Celce-Murcia, Marianne

Publication Date
1989

DOI
10.5070/B5.36670

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

The CATESOL Journal

MARIANNE CELCE-MURCIA
University of California, Los Angeles

Models for Content-Based Curricula for ESL

This paper defines and illustrates content-based language teaching in the ESL context. Some good programs are cited as examples, and the reader is given an introduction to the theoretical and practical motivations of content-based ESL, along with some notion of who the principle innovators are. Three content-based models (theme-based, adjunct, and sheltered) are presented in some detail. Since content-based ESL fits so well with current principles of communicative second language teaching, the author argues that content-based ESL, tempered with judicious use of humanistically motivated experiential activities, will be the major approach to formal ESL instruction at all levels in the near future.

While ESL/EFL teachers work in very disparate teaching situations, they readily exchange ideas and share common principles of good ESL/EFL teaching. In fact, much of the impetus for growth and development in the field of ESL has come from our colleagues in the Council of Europe, who over the years, have developed a set of guiding principles for foreign and second language learning and teaching (see Trim, 1985), which teachers and learners (along with other parties involved in the process such as parents, administrators, testers, and publishers) are asked to adopt and adapt to their own special circumstances. These principles are: (a) Language learning and teaching are part of continuing education; (b) language education should be learner-centered; (c) language education should be related to other aspects of learners' lives; (d) language education should be democratic; (e) language education should use the communicative approach as its frame of reference; and (f) language education should be experiential.

Preliminaries to Content-based Instruction

Today, because of recent advances in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, as well as the development of guiding principles such as the six just cited, teachers and administrators are looking for ways

to change curricula to enhance learning. To conduct this search successfully I believe we should answer five major questions.

1. How can we best determine what the needs and interests of our ESL students are (i.e., needs assessment)?

2. What content and what curriculum model would best suit our ESL program?

3. Where can we find and how can we produce the most useful, authentic, task-oriented materials for teaching ESL?

4. How can our ESL program encourage and support student-centered methods?

5. What kind of ESL professionals do we need if we want them to address the immediately preceding four concerns?

The best way to determine the interests and needs of our students is, first of all, to find out what kinds of students we serve in general (native language and culture, age, proficiency level in English, areas of likely academic specialization). For this, we need a good diagnostic and placement instrument (see Alderson, 1987 for such tests), so that students' strengths and weaknesses can be assessed quickly and reliably. If good biodata are collected when this instrument is administered, then we also have the social, ethnic, and educational background of our learners. Each group (or class) of students must be carefully examined to see how general programmatic goals can best be met for those particular students. This is a complex matter and Munby (1978) and Buckingham (1981) at least point the teacher and administrator in the right direction.

In answer to the second question, the curriculum model and materials best suited to teach English for academic purposes to ESL students—once students are beyond the beginning level in English language proficiency—is some form of content-based language instruction. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) define content-based language teaching as "the integration of particular content with language teaching aims. More specifically ... the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills" (p. 2). The same authors, who hold that a second or foreign language is mastered most effectively when used as the medium to teach content of interest and relevance to the learner, point out that the content-based model also satisfies the need for providing appropriate academic experiences as part of the learner's language development.

As soon as students have reached the low-intermediate level in their English language proficiency, some form of content-based language teaching is both possible and desirable at any level from kindergarten through university. Although my own experience with content-based language teaching is at the university level, I know of innovative programs at all levels of ESL instruction. In British Columbia, Canada, Bernard Mohan (1979, 1986) and his colleagues (see especially Early, Thew, & Wakefield, 1986) have been implementing content-based language teaching with great success in K-12. Innovative secondary teachers have implemented programs such as Chamot and O'Malley's CALLA system (Chamot & O'Malley, 1986, 1987). At the adult level, a content-based approach has long been a part of the curriculum.

Types of Content-Based Instruction

Over the years, several different models of content-based ESL instruction have been developed. The three most prominent ones, according to Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989), are (a) the theme-based model, (b) the adjunct model, and (c) the sheltered model.

Theme-Based Modal

The theme-based model is perhaps the content-based model that is most widely used because of its flexibility. It is being used now at the University of Southern California (Ryan, 1983), at the Monterey Institute for International Studies, and at other institutions. In this model the ESL teacher is able to draw from a large number of prepared units or modules that deal with content one might expect to encounter in a variety of university or secondary school subjects, or in daily life. For example, a university-level ESL curriculum might have units on:

(a) principles of marketing (business or economics);

(b) the theory of the black hole (astronomy, geophysics);

(c) solar energy (physics, ecology);

(d) conversation analysis (sociology, anthropology);

(e) short- and long-term memory (psychology); or

(f) the life cycle of the Antarctic skua (zoology, biology).

Each unit or module has readings, audiovisual resources and activities from which the ESL instructor can select to develop and enhance the language skills of her students, i.e., to give students practice in reading and writing academic English and in carrying out related listening and speaking activities. The ESL instructor, in other words, is also the content instructor. The learners get credit only for the language class. An ESL program must make a major commitment to materials development in implementing a theme-based program, more so than in an adjunct or sheltered program where the content textbook and lectures serve as the primary source of materials. Recently, however, a number of ESL textbooks have followed a theme-based approach (for example, *Mosaic*).

Adjunct Approach

The adjunct approach to content-based ESL has been developed extensively at UCLA by my colleagues Ann Snow and Donna Brinton (1988a). In this model the ESL students (intermediate-level—approximately 525-550 on the TOEFL) enroll for credit in a content course such as Introduction to Psychology or Introduction to Anthropology, and then enroll concurrently, also for credit, in an ESL course for linguistic preparation and support for the content course in which they are competing academically with native English-speaking students. All materials for the ESL course are drawn from the textbook or lecture notes for the content course. Skills such as listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and essay writing (as well as vocabulary and grammar) are practiced and developed to enhance the ESL student's performance in the content course. Under such an arrangement, we find that ESL students do satisfactory or good work in the content class and do better in the content course than ESL students not receiving the content-based adjunct. As an added bonus, the content-adjunct ESL students have improved their English language skills and their level of English proficiency. Such a program is obviously most feasible in situations where a good number of ESL students are high school students or college undergraduates since graduate students would not, typically, be enrolling in an American history course or introductory psychology or anthropology course.[1]

Sheltered Instruction Model

The sheltered instruction model has been developed at the university level by Krashen and used at USC and the University of Ottawa (see Wesche, 1984). It is also used in many secondary schools in California where there is a heavy concentration of ESL students. In this model, if there are sufficiently large numbers of ESL undergraduates at a college or university or ESL students at a high school, one section of a content course such as Introduction to Psychology or American History can be offered for nonnative speakers only. Bonafide content instructors offer the course and give lectures and assignments with the knowledge that their students are not native English speakers and may, in fact, be only low-intermediate level. In such circumstances the professors generally lecture more deliberately, use more visual aids, repeat more, and modify their language in various ways that have been studied and characterized as "foreigner talk" (Wesche & Ready, 1985). The textbook in such a course is the same one that native English speakers use, and the ESL instructor is a support and resource person who highlights important content and targets key vocabulary and structures for practice either immediately preceding or following the content lectures. The ESL instructor is also available outside class for extensive individual assistance as needed but does not necessarily offer a separate course, and the learners only get credit for the content course.

Usually, content-based language instruction is multiskilled in its approach. However, there is an interesting proposal by Shih (1986), who discusses five approaches to handling content-based composition classes for ESL students at the university level. (To some extent Shih's proposals overlap with the three content-based models described above. There is no reason why a version of Shih's content-based composition approaches could not be implemented at the secondary level also.)

Her five approaches are:

(a) topic-centered modules or minicourses, i.e., what I have been referring to as theme-based instruction;

(b) content-based academic writing courses—emphasizing reading and writing—for undergraduate ESL students to prepare them to handle writing tasks across disciplines. (Shih seems to be describing a general EAP writing course here);

(c) content-centered sheltered subject matter with focus on English for special purposes, i.e., the sheltered model discussed above;

(d) ESL composition courses or tutorials as adjuncts to designated content courses, i.e., the previously mentioned adjunct model; and

(e) individualized help with course-related writing at times of need (through faculty, tutors, and/or learning center staff).

Questions About Content-Based Instruction

Many of my colleagues have an interest in developing content-based programs. Here are answers to some of the most frequently asked questions.

A colleague who is a member of TESOL and who has read a draft of this paper said, "Fine, but in a small ESL program like mine with 60 to 100 students—75% graduates, 25% undergraduates—how workable is a content-based syllabus? Isn't it incredibly hard to plan and execute for a small group that changes every few weeks?"

My response is that only a theme-based model seems possible in such a program and that, yes, it is hard to plan and execute classes—especially at first when you begin to develop the repertoire of theme-based modules and units that you want to be able to draw upon given the needs and interests of any given group of students you may have at any given time. With a small program, individualized content-based instruction with a learning center format may be most efficient for the high-intermediate and advanced students. In such a treatment the ESL instruction ties in with the writing assignments or reading assignments the students do in their content courses. Where several students are taking the same content course, pairs or small groups

can be organized and mini-ESL courses can be tailor-made to fit the needs of each individual student or group of students (much on the model of the one-room schoolhouse). This, of course, requires good background and great flexibility, along with creativity on the part of the ESL teacher.

Another question that has come up is this one: "We have a flexible placement process in our ESL program whereby a student may be in a basic grammar class but an intermediate oral communication class. How is total integration of content-based themes possible in such a situation?"

One solution I know is for all ESL faculty in such a program to assess their students' needs and interests—regardless of proficiency level—and for the progam as a whole to then decide what the themes will be and how long each theme will be used for any given instructional term. That means that both the beginning grammar class and the intermediate oral skills class could be dealing with a theme like *marketing*. The materials used would be different—appropriate to the proficiency level and the skill level—yet the theme would remain the same so that the students would not have to be coping with three different themes at the same time if they happen to be taking three different ESL courses at different levels.

Another question that I have often heard content area teachers ask is this: "What can and should I do if there are just a few ESL students in my basically native English-speaking classroom?"

In such a situation the ESL students are getting content-based instruction by definition. To be both humane and effective, we must ensure the students have basic proficiency and skills in English before they are put in such a situation. Then, ideally, there would be special ESL support for these students so they get extra language assistance from the school's ESL teacher and instructional aide or tutor. If the classroom teacher is properly trained and can provide this additional language support, that is wonderful. In too many instances, however, when a content class lacks a language component, students develop good receptive skills but inadequate production skills in their second language.

Creative solutions are possible in virtually every situation if there is a real commitment on the part of the faculty and the administration to implementing a content-based ESL program.

The previous questions all focus on content-based instruction in teaching academic ESL at secondary or college level. How can such an approach be implemented in the adult ESL program? Content-based instruction in the forms of survival English, vocational ESL, and citizenship training has long been a part of adult education. The rationale for such classes has been that the content and language skills acquired during experience with a content-oriented needs-based curiculum have the greatest possibility of being applied, augmented, and extended whenever learners study, work, or go about daily routines in English—as many of our adult learners will have to do for the rest of their lives.

In addition to studying survival English, citizenship, amnesty, or vocational ESL, our adult ESL students are, outside of class, studying a society, culture, and environment that are new, unusual, and different in many respects from those that they were accustomed to in their home countries. Perhaps the classroom environment itself will be more familiar to some of them than the surrounding community. Therefore, there is a need for orientation, first of all, to the adult education system and, secondly, to the surrounding community. Perhaps this need can best be met by using well-developed experiential language learning activities such as those suggested by Jerald and Clark (1983). They suggest that activities dealing with, say, use of the local public library, developing interpersonal relationships, opening a bank account, and applying for a job be used at the start of the school year before and then between the necessary content-based units. Later other experiential activities such as using local transportation, telephone use and related language conventions, and finding and getting directions in the larger comunity can also be included as a valuable socially motivated supplement to the content-based instruction.[2]

Again, the students themselves can and should specify areas in which they feel they need special linguistic and cultural assistance. Based on such student feedback, the teacher can prepare appropriate activities. For example, if students express a need to gain proficiency in asking directions (from strangers) they could be assigned a mapping-it-out activity (Jerald & Clark, 1983, pp. 24-26). This activity sends learners, with incomplete street maps, to a section of the town near the school. The task for the students is to label all streets, buildings, and monuments on the map and to do a variety of tasks that will require them to interact with native speakers. In a large town or city, each student can go to a different section, and the information thus gathered can be pooled and shared when the class reassembles. With these activities it is crucial to use some class time to prepare students for the task in advance (such as practice with polite questions). It is also important to follow up such an experience with appropriate discussion (e.g., share experiences. Did students ask for help? What happened?).[3]

Summary

I would like to summarize by returning to the five major concerns and directions for ESL that I proposed earlier in the paper:

1. How can we best determine what the needs and interests of our ESL students are?

We can use our past experience with similar groups of students, of course, but we must also collect relevant biodata from our current students and interact with them regularly on such matters because their perceptions of their own needs may be somewhat different from those of previous groups. Also, their perceptions will change and evolve as their coursework and English proficiency progress. There is also the constant need to assess skill areas and language areas to see what students are learning and what they are not learning.

2. What content and curriculum model would best serve our ESL students?

Obviously, I believe that some type of content-based approach, tempered by humanistically motivated experiential activities—which are especially crucial with adult learners—would be the best solution. However, each institution and program will have to decide what is most appropriate and feasible for their students and their program.

3. How can we find or produce authentic task-based materials for teaching ESL?

If one chooses the adjunct or sheltered model, then the textbook and lecture notes for the content class become the main source of authentic material, with the ESL teacher providing supplementary materials for focus or clarification as needed. A much larger job is involved in the preparation of theme-based curricula where the ESL teacher is responsible for both content and language with a need to locate or prepare reading materials, audiovisual aids, activities and tasks, all of which support the various themes. This approach works best in settings which encourage a team approach to materials development and which allow released time to support materials development. On the other hand, if an individualized approach is taken, then much of the authentic materials will come from the students' own reading and writing assignments in their content courses.

4. How can our ESL program encourage student-centered learning?

To some extent, this is a question that each ESL program must answer regardless of the curriculum or method it selects. It must look at what it does do, and explore what it can do. It is possible to have a content-based curriculum that is not student centered, if the teachers and administrators make all the decisions about instruction and materials independent of the students themselves (what their needs and interests are and in which areas they need help with their English for optimal academic progress). This is simply poor planning and instruction when such a situation occurs. If content-based instruction is implemented in a way that actively takes students' needs and interests into account in an ongoing manner and actively involves students by making them responsible for their own learning, then it is definitely a student-centered approach. However, we should add that student-centered methods and techniques must also be used to support such an approach and to make it truly student centered.

5. What should ESL professionals know if they are to address the preceding four concerns (needs assessment, curriculum materials and tasks, student-centered methods)?

Ideally, we want teachers with expertise in many areas. They would have the basic skills necessary for all ESL teachers:

(a) linguistic competence;

(b) methodological competence;

(c) understanding of the language teaching/learning process;

(d) lesson planning skills; and

(e) classroom management skills.

Teachers in content-based programs should also be skilled in:

(a) needs assessment,

(b) curriculum development,

(c) language assessment/testing, and

(d) materials development.

They should have audiovisual (and technical) expertise and be able to conduct program evaluation (to ensure that all components are student-centered and effective).

Many readers will say that it is almost impossible to find a group of ESL teachers, all of whom can do all of the above. True, but it is possible to find all of the above skills represented in almost any given group of 5 to 10 qualified and experienced ESL professionals, and where those skills are not all well-represented, the teachers can and should continue their education in the areas of need—through such avenues as TESOL Summer Institutes, evening extension classes at a local college or university, conference workshops, or independent reading. In other words, Trim's (1985) first guiding principle for language education (i.e., that it is continuing education) applies to teachers as much as (or more so) than it does to students. If teachers decide they are committed to a content-based curriculum for their students, they must be willing to learn more about the necessary components and to grow as professionals. If administrators are convinced that a content-based approach would be best for their program, they must either hire teachers who can carry out such a program or assist their teachers in obtaining new skills through continuing education so that implementation of a content-based approach will ultimately be feasible. Implementation, of course, also requires released time for teachers to do materials development—especially in the theme-based model.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to restate that I have provided some examples of good content-based programs and argued for a content-based approach to ESL instruction tempered with the judicious use of humanistically motivated experiential activities as the most appropriate direction for an ESL program to take if it is serving ESL students in a secondary, adult, or higher education program. I have also mentioned the work of Mohan (1979, 1986) and his colleagues and that of Chamot and O'Malley (1986, 1987), among others, who are implementing content-based ESL programs at the elementary levels. For all such populations content-based language instruction is also the approach most compatible with the six guiding principles of ESL instruction that have been developed by the European Community (Trim, 1985).

I should add, parenthetically, that content-based ESL instruction did not develop out of the blue, but that it has historical antecedents in some earlier language teaching movements such as Immersion Education, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and Writing Across the Curriculum. However, content-based ESL has evolved in special ways that clearly distinguish it from these other movements. As such, content-based language teaching has strong theoretical and empirical foundations that I believe will soon help make it the dominant approach to teaching ESL at all levels. ■

Acknowledgements

Oral versions of this paper were delivered as the NAFSA ATESL plenary (May, 1987, Long Beach, CA) and an ORTESOL plenary (October, 1988, Wilsonville, OR). I am most grateful to my colleagues, Donna Brinton and Ann Snow, who have educated me over the years on the merits and models of content-based language teaching and who gave me valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. They are in no way responsible for any errors or shortcomings that remain.

Footnotes

[1]We do know of one case where an optional ESL adjunct was offered at the graduate level to Business Law majors at the University of Southern California. A significant number of nonnative English speakers from abroad typically enroll in this graduate course.

[2]Donna Brinton (personal communication) has pointed out that experiential humanistic activities can easily be integrated into most content-based ESL instruction—and into theme-based units in particular. ESL teachers at all levels and in all settings who plan their theme-based units cleverly can and do incorporate the more humanistic, experiential aspects of language learning.

[3]Guyer and Peterson (1988) also incorporated these kinds of activities as preliminaries to a Human Geography ESL adjunct that they taught at the university level.

Marianne Celce-Murcia is professor of applied linguistics at UCLA and a longtime member of CATESOL. Her teaching and publications are mainly in two areas: (a) grammar and discourse, and (b) language methodology (including curriculum models and materials development).

References

Alderson, J. C., Kranhke, K. J., & Stansfield, C. W. (Eds.). (1987). *Reviews of English Language Proficiency Tests.* Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Brinton, D., Snow, M. A., & Wesche, M. (1989). *Content-based second language instruction.* New York: Newbury House.

Buckingham, T. (1981). *Needs assessment in ESL.* Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Chamot, A. V., & O'Malley, M. J. (1986). *A cognitive academic language learning approach: ESL content-based curriculum.* Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

Chamot, A. V., & O'Malley, M. J. (1987). The cognitive academic language learning approach. *TESOL Quarterly, 21*(2), 227-249.

Early, M., Thew, C., & Wakefield, P. (1986). *Integrating language and content instruction K-12: An ESL resource book.* Victoria, Canada: Publications Service Branch, Ministry of Education.

Guyer, E., & Peterson, P. W. (1988). Language and/or content? Principles and procedures for materials development in adjunct courses. In S. Benesch (Ed.), *Ending remediation: Linking ESL and content in higher education* (pp. 91-111). Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Jerald, M., & Clark, R. (1983). *Experiential language learning techniques.* Brattleboro, VT: Pro Lingua Associates.

Mohan, B. M. (1979). Relating language teaching to content teaching. *TESOL Quarterly, 13*(2), 171-182.

Mohan, B. M. (1986). *Language and content.* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Mosaic 1 and 2. M. Gill (Ed.). (1987). New York: McGraw Hill.

Munby, J. (1978). *Communicative syllabus design.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryan, P. (1983). *A case study of a content-based ESL program.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.

Shih, M. (1986). Content-based approaches to teaching academic writing. *TESOL Quarterly, 20*(4), 617-648.

Snow, M. A., & Brinton, D. (1988a). The adjunct model of language instruction: An ideal EAP framework. In S. Benesch (Ed.), *Ending remediation: Linking ESL and content in higher education*(pp. 33-52). Washington, DC: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.

Trim, J. (1985). Commentator 2, response to C. Edelhoff's paper A view from teacher in-service education and training. In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 143-145). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wesche, M. B. (1984). A promising experiment at Ottawa University. *Language and Society, 12*, 20-25.

Wesche, M. B., & Ready, D. (1985). Foreigner talk in the university classroom. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 89-114). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.