Content-Based Instruction – An Overview

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Introduction

For L2 English speakers, entering into the world of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) can be a trying and overwhelming experience. Having landed in an English speaking country for their first time, these students may feel helpless and isolated as they attempt to navigate through the unknown local culture and understand the countries’ social norms. Simultaneously, they may need to cope with high expectations and pressure from their family overseas, all while dealing with a heavy academic workload and a lack of scholarly background in their chosen specialization (Fox, Cheng, Berman, Song, & Myles, 2006, p.87).

Additionally, within their EAP class these students must become proficient in using a variety of new skills in order to prepare for their academic careers. To become successful students in their L2, they must target various new aspects of the language. This includes academic writing, critical reading, listening and speaking during lectures, note taking, exam preparation, as well as general and specific academic vocabulary (Kasper, 2000, p.78-87). Given the degree to which these needs vary from those of an ESL or EFL student, and as a result of findings which suggest that generic ESL and EFL courses are unable to fulfill them (Krashen in Bell, 1996), a new approach has been developed to bridge the gap. This paper examines this approach both with a wide scope and in detail, beginning by defining the central tenets of a content-based pedagogy, then by surveying some theoretical and empirical support, and finally by illustrating the challenges that are present to course designers and teachers.
Content-Based Instruction (CBI) in EAP

In response to the needs of the aforementioned students, the popularity of content-based instruction (CBI) has grown considerably in recent years (Snow, 1998, 243).

According to Pally (1997), the central belief of CBI is that by using the target language to learn information over a continued period, the students will acquire the language while simultaneously advancing their knowledge of the content. Instead of explicitly teaching language items, motivating the students to “interact with authentic, contextualised, linguistically challenging materials in a communicative and academic context” (Kasper, 2000, p.4), allows them to benefit from improved language proficiency as they acquire information in their L2.

Relevant and engaging content - as opposed to language - is the focus of the course and improved language ability is the product (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989, p. 2-14). Furthermore, Pally asserts that when students are involved in gathering this information, synthesizing it, and finally evaluating it, they must think critically, ultimately strengthening their language skills (Pally, 1997).

Although the above is generally agreed upon within the literature, what content should be used, the extent to which it should be used, the extent to which the teacher should be familiar with the content, and who the teacher should be is still widely contested (Fox, et al. 2006, p. 11-30; James, 2006, p. 802; Pally, 1997, p. 294). Nonetheless, three general models of CBI in EAP exist; namely the adjunct model, the sheltered model, and the theme-based model.

Using the adjunct model, students are concurrently enrolled in two courses, which are linked to each other. One of these courses is a content course, and the other is an EAP course. The latter complements the former by coordinating the subject matter which is presented in the
class and adapting it to prepare the students for successful participation in the content course. Like the adjunct model, the subject matter of the sheltered model is also designed for a specific discipline.

However, unlike the adjunct model, which combines L1 and L2 speakers in the mainstream content course, the sheltered course is only for L2 speakers. Instead of participating in two linked courses, the students are ‘sheltered’ from the L1 content course, and only attend a separate course which has been tailored to their language needs. Texts may be selected according to their organization and clarity while lectures may be geared more closely to the texts to improve comprehension. Furthermore, the teacher may put greater emphasis on the students’ receptive abilities instead of requiring a great deal of production (Brinton, et al., 1989).

These two models, however, are not always feasible due to a lack of student enrolment from a specific discipline, or a lack of resources from the institution. In this case, a theme-based model of CBI can be used. This is the most popular model, as with this approach a course can be offered in nearly any academic setting (Brinton, et al., 1989). Often in a theme-based course, the students have been accepted to university with the condition that they must pass the EAP class in order to achieve full admission. This is a result of a failing grade on a language proficiency test taken as a part of the university application process. They may also be allowed to take one other content course while taking the EAP class, but will only receive credit for this course if the EAP course is successfully completed (Fox, et al., 2006). Since the students are from a variety of academic disciplines, the content of the course is “chosen for general appeal across a wide range of academic interests (e.g. biology, sociology, ecology, psychology, etc.) and focus on the development of generic academic skills and strategies such as effective note taking, scanning or skimming, writing summaries, etc.” (Fox, et al., 2006, p. 9).
Theoretical Support for CBI in EAP

In any mainstream university course, the ability to think critically is necessary for a student’s academic success. At various points throughout their program, students may be required to discuss an issue, raise questions, determine the value of contradictory viewpoints, organise, and synthesize information which they have gathered from a variety of sources, and produce texts reflecting their views.

A content-based program which gives its students plenty of opportunities to accrue, evaluate, and synthesize information across a variety of disciplines and through differing genres of discourse, can support these mainstream courses in many ways.

Firstly, this will allow students to practice and refine the critical thinking skills, which they will require to be successful outside of the EAP program. Taking the learners’ eventual use of the language into account, the CBI course gives them many opportunities for practice within an academic context (Pally, 1997).

Secondly, since the students are practicing skills which they perceive as relevant to their academic careers, their acquisition of the target language is also facilitated by increased motivation (Song, 2001).

Moreover, providing learners with sustained content over time lends itself well to the theory of scaffolding. As students are repeatedly exposed to a common theme using a variety of different types of discourse, they can use their experiences from previous lessons to build up to tasks which are incrementally more challenging. Then, as they become more proficient using the skills that they have learned, they can gradually begin to explore the topics in a more autonomous and less structured manner (Kasper, 2000, p. 6).
Finally, using content as a medium for language learning allows students to learn the L2 based on contextualized, rather than sentence level use. In this, students are able to benefit from awareness of the “discourse level features and the social interaction patterns which are essential to effective language use, as well as of the correct grammatical conventions” (Brinton, et al., 1989, p.3). According to Krashen, input must be meaningful and understood by the learner, while also introducing new language items to be acquired. Through CBI, students are able to intersect their experiential knowledge and expectations about the subject matter with their imperfect knowledge of the target language, in order to comprehend and implicitly acquire the language features being presented (Brinton, et al., 1989).

**Research in CBI**

While theoretical support is an important first step to legitimizing CBI, it must also be supported by evidence which determines its effectiveness over time. Research should compare language proficiency tests from students who have participated in content-based courses with those who have participated in generic ESL or EFL courses, as well as evaluate CBI’s psychological and pedagogical benefits. It should establish whether significant gains in a content-based course will give students an advantage in their mainstream courses, and whether that “will translate into sustainable academic success, [which is] often judged by measures such as GPA, retention and graduation rate” (Song, 2006, p.422)

For CBI, such research began in the eighties, with “a growing body of research indicating that [CBI] lead to high levels of language development and academic achievement while providing students with worthwhile and interesting subject matter” (Brinton, et al., 1989, p. 213).
This began with a comparison of two groups who participated in a psychology program at the University of Ottawa. The experimental group in a sheltered course, demonstrated gains in proficiency that were comparable to the control group, who were enrolled in a skills based French course. Furthermore, the students who were enrolled in the content-based course showed greater confidence and determination to use their second language. Likewise, in 1988, several hundred students who were enrolled in the content-based program at UCLA reported “that they were better writers and could read their content texts more effectively” (Brinton, et al., 1989, p. 213). Similar studies by Lafayette and Buscaglia (1985), Peck (1987), and Buch and De Bagheera (1987) also provided “limited but promising evidence that content-based instruction enhances both language and concept development and promotes positive attitudes” (see Brinton, et al., 1989, p. 215).

Throughout the nineties, ongoing research in CBI has continued to legitimize its practice. This was forged by Kasper (1994; 1995; 1995/1996; 1997 in Snow, 1998), through a variety of studies performed at Kingsborough Community College and CUNY. Kasper “found that students enrolled in content-based ESL courses obtained higher pass rates in the ESL course itself than did students enrolled in non-content based courses” (Snow, 1998, p.253). In 1994, she also discovered that students who had enrolled in adjunct courses were able to perform at the same level as L1 speakers in the mainstream course. Moreover, in 1997, she followed her students’ performance in an intermediate content-based EAP course, all the way through to their subsequent graduation. She found that these students performed better on language proficiency tests, received higher grades throughout their academic careers, and graduated at a higher rate than ESL students who had not received content-based instruction (Kasper, 2000, p. 28-44; Snow, 1998, p.253).
While these findings have made significant contributions to CBI, James (2006) still urges further research. James states, “despite the growing body of research on CBI critics have argued that the research base is limited” (p. 784). As a solution to this, he contends that researchers should turn their focus to the subject of transfer of learning. In a study, he set out to do this by quantitatively investigating the academic careers of five students who had participated in a CBI course. Drawing on information provided by class observations, the students, their TA’s and their professors he concluded that learning transfer did in fact occur in six different categories including; listening comprehension, writing skills and study skills. James asserts that his findings suggest further research into the impact of content on transfer, as well as a look at which models of CBI are most effective (Snow, 2006).

In a similar study conducted by Song (2006), the academic records of 770 students were used to determine transferability between 1995 and 2000. Using a control group which did not receive content-based instruction, Song found that students who were enrolled in an adjunct course performed better “in measures such as English proficiency test pass rates, graduation and retention rates, and overall GPA” (Song, 2006, p. 420).

Challenges Facing CBI in EAP

Many teachers face challenges employing a content-based pedagogy in EAP. Often, a lack of funding within the institution hampers the potential of such courses, leaving curriculum designers and teachers to make the best of the resources available to them. Due to financial constraints, adjunct or sheltered courses may not be an option, meaning that teachers will need to adopt a theme-based model. Furthermore, given the time constraints of professors and EAP teachers, collaboration between them may not be possible either (Kasper, 2000, p.12). In this, the
EAP teacher may feel overwhelmed and isolated with the seemingly impossible task of preparing a single class of students for academic language proficiency in a variety of disciplines.

Moreover, the role that the content-based course should fulfill is also an area of controversy among curriculum designers. While some believe that an EAP course should focus on writing ability, others assert that it should train all four skills, or specific vocabulary, or a variety of other responsibilities such as taking advantage of the classrooms cultural capital, creating empowered, efficient, and self-directed learners (Snow, 1998, p.257; Fox, et al., 2006, p. 11-30).

Once these variables have been settled upon, many others come into play as well. Teachers must be trained to teach with a content-based approach, and have an understanding of how to implement it most effectively in the classroom. They must then decide how they will justify their teaching method to their students, who may have had very differing language learning experiences in the past. Students may experience apprehension to a content-based approach, as they are unable to understand the relevance of the chosen content to their own discipline (Kasper, 2000, p.17-18). Likewise, teachers choosing which content they will include must find a “universal donor”, which can sustain the interests of a variety of students and which can be useful to their academic careers (Pally, 1997, 300).

Finally, the chosen content must be analysed and decisions must be made concerning the degree to which its discipline specific language is incorporated into the course, as well as the degree to which explicit language instruction should be combined with the content focus. Teachers must achieve an appropriate level of understanding of the chosen content before it can be used as well, and they must decide how they will assess the students’ performance. Although
the content-course is aimed at improving a students’ academic language skills, often assessment is done using multiple choice, decontextualized, language tests (Kasper, 2000, p.19).

Although the research in content-based instruction has been expanding since the eighties, there are still too many gaps for a teacher to make informed decisions about the abovementioned variables. As noted by Snow (2006), further research must be done to determine the impact that a content-based pedagogy has on a student’s academic career, as well as which content and which model of instruction is most effective, what the role of the teacher should be in the classroom, and to what extent explicit language instruction can be helpful.
References


