Content Based ESL Curriculum and Academic Language Proficiency

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ESL students' school success hinges upon their proficiency of academic language. Thus, it is critical for ESL teachers to move beyond the functional English syllabus and to start providing a content-rich, high-standards curriculum that prepares ESL students to become academically successful in content learning. This article provides a critical needs rationale for implementing a content-based ESL curriculum and discusses ways to implement it.

Introduction

This article discusses critical needs for implementing a content-based ESL curriculum (CBEC) in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes as measures to further ensure their success in academic achievement: First, the article introduces a theoretical framework that provides rationale for CBEC; second, it presents ways to implement CBEC.

This conversation is fictional, but very plausible.

- **Teacher**: Why were you absent yesterday, Eduardo?
- **Eduardo**: '*Cause* I had to take my little sister to the hospital, *'cause* she had a stomach ache and she was crying. My mother left for work already and I cannot drive, so Icall [ed] my uncle, then I *wait[ed]* for him to come and get my sister. We took her to the hospital.

Eduardo's oral English skills are excellent. The meaning is clearly delivered to the teacher as to why he was absent with minimal hindrance to communication although the fictional student's speech sample indicates that he does not consistently mark the verbs for the past tense. However, this sort of speech sample is typical among fluent ESL students.

When ESL students' basic conversational English skills are as high as this, what should ESL teachers teach to take the student to an even higher level of English? Should an ESL teacher drill more to help the student express himself more concisely or conduct additional grammar drills for mastery of verb tenses? The answer to these questions is definitively, no, not for students who can produce this level of fluent oral language. They can adequately survive in social settings, but surviving in academic settings is another matter.

What these ESL students need is strong academic English that helps them perform successfully in content areas because a strong proficiency in oral English does not necessarily translate into ESL students' academic success.

Traditionally, ESL instruction focuses on preparing ESL students to know what to say and how to say it in different situations along, with basic reading and writing skills (Freeman & Freedman, 1998). ESL teachers can achieve that goal by moving beyond the functional-notional language syllabus and by adopting a CBEC, which targets content-rich, high-standards curriculum with critical thinking skills.

Theoretical Background

Cummins (1980;1981;1996) theorized that there are two kinds of English proficiency that ESL students must learn. The first is

basic interpersonal conversational skills (BICS) that ESL students need when they carry on face-to-face conversation in social settings. BICS English is characterized as context-embedded since contextual cues are available to both speaker and listener involved in the conversation, and it is cognitively undemanding. As the vignette illustrates, ESL students can easily recount orally what happened to them personally without difficulty once they attain fluency. According to Cummins (1980), it takes only 2 to 3 years for ESL students to attain BICS English. In other words, BICS English is easy to learn, and can be attained in a rather in a short period of time.

The other proficiency is **cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)**. CALP English is characterized as context-reduced, as is found in written texts in content areas such as math, science, and social studies. Due to its decontextualized nature, ESL students struggle to comprehend what they read and to express what they know in writing. CALP English used in context-reduced academic learning demands high cognition on the part of the ESL student. In addition, Cummins reports that it takes 5 to 7 years for ESL students to be proficient in CALP English. Unlike BICS learning, CALP learning is a long-term undertaking. Collier (1987, 1989; Collier & Thomas, 1989) suggests that it can take up to 10 years for ESL students to reach grade-level CALP English depending on the kind of English instruction they receive. Collier & Thomas (1989) report that the ESL students who were taught in pull-out ESL settings took the longest time to reach grade level. What Cummins' BICS and CALP signify for ESL education is that, in order for ESL students to read and comprehend content area textbooks and perform cognitively demanding tasks, such as writing research papers, participating in debates, and presenting research papers, they need CALP English that takes them beyond that of BICS English.

Eduardo in the fictional vignette has strong BICS English; however, he needs strong CALP English to be successful in content areas and achieve high marks in school. Ensuring ESL students' academic success has never been more urgent due to the *No Child Left Behind* legislation of 2001. ESL students' content area success matters because ESL teachers, as well as mainstream teachers, are held responsible for their adequate yearly academic progress. As discussed so far, ESL students' academic success is heavily hinged upon attaining CALP English.

What are the best ways to help a student like Eduardo, who is strong in BICS but might need to improve CALP, be successful in academic learning? One method is to integrate subject matter and language development through CBEC.

The Necessity of Content Based ESL Curriculum

In traditional ESL classes, the most time is spent on "how-to-says" under imagined situations focusing on social language competency; however, language learning in CBEC provides purposeful, meaningful, and authentic opportunities for ESL students (Short, 1993). Thus, the benefits of CBEC are manifold:

- First of all, ESL students learn age-appropriate content knowledge that reflects the content learning in the mainstream. While there is a significant gap in background knowledge between ESL students and mainstream students, CBEC can provide ESL students with opportunities to catch up with mainstream students' background knowledge. When they learn grade-level content in math, science, and social studies, the background knowledge gained from CBEC will facilitate their learning in mainstream classes. According to Chamot and O'Malley (1994), CBEC is a motivation factor for ESL students. They not only feel that they are being challenged with a high-standards curriculum, but also feel more prepared in mainstream classes because they understand more.
- Second, ESL students read authentic texts, not simplified or contrived text written for ESL students only. Thus, learning is more meaningful and situated.
- Third, language learning becomes more purposeful. That is, ESL students learn the language, not about the language. English learning becomes a means to an end, which can accelerate second language acquisition. They do not just learn how to construct an expository writing, instead they can write about the science experiment result based on the hypothesis they formed.
- Fourth, ESL students learn technical vocabulary, which they critically lack. Vocabulary knowledge has been closely linked with academic success (Senechal & Cornell, 1993). CBEC provides the most meaningful vocabulary learning opportunities for ESL students because they not only learn technical vocabulary but also use it in context. Thus vocabulary learning is not only facilitated but also enduring.

Ways to Implement CBEC

Although there are content-based ESL models such as the **Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA)** developed by Chamot and O'Malley (1991) or sheltered instruction models such as **Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE),** these can be intimidating for both novice and veteran ESL teachers when they do not have proper training in implementation of the models. In addition, models like CALLA and SDAIE target the system-wide implementation, which is beyond an individual ESL teacher's control. However, individual ESL teachers, either in elementary or secondary settings, can certainly implement CBEC in their own classroom without having the system involved.

The steps that individual teachers can take are described below.

- First, the ESL teacher consults with mainstream teachers to find out what units ESL students will be studying in the next marking period or even the next semester (long-term preparation) in various subjects. It should be noted that ESL students' English level is the guiding force in selecting reading materials since they read and write below grade level. Another important factor in deciding content areas is the ESL teachers' comfort level. Teachers should not force upon themselves a content area with which they are extremely uncomfortable. ESL teachers should choose a content area they feel comfortable with and enjoy teaching. They can gradually broaden selections of content areas as they gain more confidence and competence.
- Second, once a content area is selected, the teacher should decide what particular concepts or units from the chosen content area will be explored. Chamot and O'Malley (1991) emphasize depth over breadth. That is, an ESL teacher cannot teach an entire curriculum of 4th grade science or 8th grade social studies. Instead, the teacher should pick one unit or two of great interest to ESL students or of great importance to their content learning. The teacher decides how detailed and specific the content should be. However, it is important that the teacher teaches the core/essential concepts related to the specific content. If the teacher chooses to teach about the rainforest, he/she must teach what it is, where it is, the habitats in the rainforest, its relation to ecological systems, the benefits of the rainforest to humans and nature, and all relevant vocabulary. Just learning rainforest-related vocabulary does not count as CBEC.
- Third, the teacher chooses content-area reading materials according to students' English proficiency. Since content-area reading is loaded with difficult syntax and semantics, it is advised to go below the students' actual grade level. For example, if students are in high school, they can work on middle school social studies--middle school materials are still challenging for high school ESL students. However, the materials should be age-sensitive. For example, a fifth grader with a limited English proficiency should not be taught with books written for kindergartners.
- Fourth, the teacher designs thematic unit lessons. To deal with a specific topic in an in-depth manner, lessons should have a series of related lessons under the same topic. For example, if the teacher teaches about recycling, the first lesson is to learn vocabulary and to build background knowledge on recycling by connecting it to their students' personal lives and reading to learn the major concepts of recycling. The second lesson is about why we need to recycle. The third lesson is to learn the recycling process. The fourth lesson can be an experimental recycling project. The fifth lesson is to write an essay on the importance of recycling to ecological systems, and the sixth lesson can have the students publish their essays in the school newspaper. Although thematic unit lessons in this example consist of six lessons, the teachers might need 10 sessions of class time in real-life, depending on the students' level and the pace of learning.

While the teacher is following these procedures, some essential ingredients have to be present in implementing CBEC.

- First, ESL students must read authentic texts. The teacher should include time for reading texts in every class--the students can repeatedly read the same part.
- Second, there have to be strong language learning components. The teacher has to design lessons in which ESL students must use academic oral English in the context of debates, group projects, or cooperative learning.
- Third, the teacher must integrate writing so that it is purposeful and meaningful in context--writing aids students' conceptual learning. The salient grammar points in a specific unit should be emphasized and reinforced throughout reading, writing, and speaking activities.
- Fourth, higher-order thinking and critical thinking skills should be reinforced through the use of real-life problem solving situations.
- Fifth, scaffolding is critical when ESL students learn abstract concepts. Hands-on activities and visual demonstration are

considered part of scaffolding because they facilitate students' concept learning.

Caveats with Content-based ESL Models

CBEC is not without critics, however. If CBEC is such a promising practice, why is it not massively implemented across the nation?

First of all, ESL teachers can be easily deterred by the demands of content knowledge and discouraged by the amount of preparation they must do. Furthermore, they do not feel that they are qualified to teach content area. Thus, it takes a great deal of initiative and effort on the teachers' part. While the ESL teacher who adopts CBEC is responsible for teaching the content correctly, it should be noted that they are not responsible for ESL students' content learning in statewide assessments while the mainstream teachers are. As discussed earlier, ESL teachers should select a content area with which they feel at ease. With some research and preparation, ESL teachers can handle a unit or two out of the entire year of one grade curriculum. As they accumulate their different units in one content area or in different content areas, their confidence grows and their preparations become easier.

Another problem associated with CBEC is that ESL teachers are too concerned with content area teaching and neglect teaching related language skills. The teachers seem to forget the main purpose of CBEC, which is to enhance English language development through content areas, not content learning per se. If language components are missing, it cannot be called CBEC. The language learning aspect should take equal priority with the content learning aspect.

Conclusion

It is important for ESL teachers to include all the important aspects of CBEC and follow the full procedures. Although implementing CBEC sounds daunting due to its preparation, benefits that ESL students receive from CBEC can outweigh ESL teachers' initial reluctance or preparation. In order for ESL students to have college as an option, they need a strong ESL curriculum that prepares them to be academically successful. ESL teaching should look beyond survival and social English fluency. The ESL teachers should think small, start small and give CBEC a try. The results will be rewarding.

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