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What is the Relationship Between Content-Based Instruction and English for Specific Purposes?

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When I was initially asked to answer this question, I felt that I could sum up the relationship in a sentence: *English for specific purposes (ESP)* is a superordinate term for all good ESL/EFL teaching, and content-based instruction (CBI) is a central force in this movement. However, after some reflection and a review of several recent articles on CBI and ESP (see, for example, Johns, 1991; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; and Snow, 1991), I concluded that there's more to this relationship than a single sentence can express.

My purpose here, then, will be to discuss the ESP and CBI movements in a more complete manner than my original response allows. First, I will discuss in what ways the two movements appear to be similar. Then, I will examine some of the features of the two movements that appear to make them different, that separate them in the minds of researchers, curriculum designers, and practitioners. My text is constructed by my own experience and reading; no doubt other would—and perhaps will—take issue with my arguments.

I would like to begin with the similarities between ESP and CBI, for they are the most obvious to me. Both movements stem from practitioners' unease about the separation of language instruction from the contexts and demands of real language use. We worry that general purpose language instruction, or TENOR (Teaching English for No Obvious Reason), cannot prepare students for the demanding linguistic, rhetorical, and contextual challenges of the real world, for example, the workplace or the academic classroom. And there is considerable evidence for our concerns, as Mohan (1986) notes:

> A language is a system that relates to what is being talked about (content) and the means to talk about it (expression). Linguistic content is inseparable from linguistic expression. *But in research and in classroom practice, this relationship is frequently ignored* [italics

added] . . . In language learning we overlook the fact that content is being communicated. (p. 1)

In both movements, then, there is an effort to discover and use genuine discourse from the real world in the language classroom, to ensure that classroom content reflects the target situation. There is also an effort to engage students in meaningful use of language, rather than in activities that focus upon the language itself. Thus, as Johns and Davies (1983) put it, language becomes a "vehicle for communication" not merely a "linguistic object," studied in isolation in an ESL grammar class, for example. Practitioners in both movements recognize that language classroom activities should be designed to assist students in interacting with content and discourse in cognitively demanding ways, or at the very least, in ways that are similar in use to those in the target language situation.

How do we determine what is authentic language and what are authentic activities? We work closely with experts in the target situation, people who know what students must do and who understand the purposes of content and discourse in their particular contexts. In CBI, there are models for working with content experts (e.g., adjunct and sheltered classes—see Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989); in ESP, there are related models, for example, team teaching (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991). Thus both ESP and CBI strive to encourage the transfer of language skills and content to real life by bringing genuine language and authentic classroom activities to students.

What is more interesting—and perhaps disturbing—to me are the perceived dissimilarities between the two movements. One of these differences relates to the scope of each movement's influence. CBI is generally limited to the English as a second language (ESL) setting, in places like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. ESP, on the other hand, prides itself in being an international movement; in fact, much of the interesting ESP work takes place in countries in which English is a foreign language (Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1991; Swales, 1985). This difference in instructional setting has resulted in the use of a variety of labels to describe courses in which language and content are integrated. Thus, ESP is the conventional term used to designate specific purposes language programs in the English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. In the ESL setting, however, terms such as *content-based instruction, workplace ESL, vocational ESL,* and *sheltered English* are preferred.[1] Judy Colman (personal communication) recently wrote from Australia that there is "a degree of resistance to using the term ESP" in ESL situations "down-under" as well. Instead, Australians employ terms such as *technical and further education for immigrant students (TAFE)* and *English in the workplace (EWP).*

We don't find the same resistance to using ESP in the EFL setting, as evidenced by the publications and conferences with ESP in the titles coming out of Latin America, China, the Middle East, and Africa. Subscriptions to *English for Specific Purposes,* a journal which John Swales, Tony Dudley-Evans, and I coedit, evidence the international nature of this movement: Half of our contributors and considerably more than half of our subscribers live in EFL contexts.

CBI is distinguished from ESP in other ways, as well: Though CBI can cover a number of specific purpose contexts and be designed for a number of populations (Mohan, 1986), in California and most of the United States, it has perhaps become most closely linked to sheltered English and the education of children in the K-12 setting. Other models of CBI in the ESL context (such as theme-based and adjunct instruction) are less well known.[2]

ESP, though traditionally focused upon the advanced, adult academic students (Swales, 1985, 1990), still claims to encompass all teaching of specific groups of adults with identifiable needs. This is the reason, I'm convinced, that the ESP Interest Group, which will probably be instituted by TESOL in 1992, originated with workplace ESL professionals whose populations and language classes are quite distinct from the content-based programs in public schools.

There are other contrasts, at least in the minds of EFL curriculum designers and teachers. Whereas CBI is generally a multiskill approach, integrating the four skills in order to make the language learning experience authentic and draw from the learning styles and strategies of the variety of students enrolled (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987), ESP has often been limited to one skill, reading, because this is what students in foreign countries badly need in order to access texts in science and technology. In fact, there are so many ESP reading courses in EFL settings that Mohan (1986) likens the movement to "reading in the content areas" (p. 15). For those interested in this phenomenon, Hudson (1991) provides a useful discussion of a well-developed overseas ESP reading program.

Finally, there are theoretical and research-related differences in scope and focus. ESP has a long research tradition, dating from the early 1960s (Swales, 1985)—a tradition that has drawn from linguistic analyses, from discourse studies, from pragmatics, and recently, from studies of discourse communities (Swales, 1990). *English for Specific Purposes* has published many articles that could just as well have appeared in journals such as *Discourse Processes* or *Applied Linguistics.* Especially in overseas environments, for example, at the Latin American ESP Colloquia, there are many more papers about text-based research than about pedagogy. This is because ESP researchers, particularly those concerned with reading subject texts, are convinced that a thorough and systematic analysis of written discourse is essential to creating a successful curriculum. Over time, this research has expanded from item counts to form/function analyses (Robinson, 1991) and recently into examining a text's uses of authority and the

values that underlie its discourse (Benson, 1991). CBI, on the other hand, seems to be much more concerned with the classroom, with student affect, with instructional strategies, and with models. No doubt each tradition can benefit from the research and curricula of the other.

I teach in a CBI program at San Diego State, and I find the contributions of the CBI experts valuable. However, I still consider myself primarily an ESP person, for I find that the movement more specifically illuminates my research and, not incidentally, has enabled me to travel and exchange ideas with colleagues throughout the world. ■

Footnotes

1. Peter Master is a notable exception. Through his column in the *CATESOL News,* he continues to insist that ESP is a term that is appropriate and relevant to EFL contexts as well as ESL teaching/learning situations such as here in California—and I would agree.

2. In foreign language teaching, CBI is typically associated with the immersion education of native speakers of English in Canada and the U.S. However, we are beginning to hear about "content-enriched" foreign language in the elementary school (FLES) programs as well (Curtain & Pesola, 1988).

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