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Content-Based College ESL Instruction

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Khalid's and Veronica's stories unfortunately are typical of the experiences of many college ESL students. Some of these students have achieved passing grades in ESL courses, yet remain painfully underprepared to deal successfully with the linguistic and academic demands of mainstream college courses. Others never get the opportunity to fulfill their academic goals because they are unable to progress rapidly enough to meet prescribed levels of English language proficiency within set time limits.

ESL students, like Khalid and Veronica, now comprise a substantial portion of the college population, and their numbers continue to increase dramatically (Crandall, 1993). This dramatic increase in the college ESL population, coupled with the pressure of institutional time limitations on developmental instruction, presents a critical challenge to ESL educators. This challenge is twofold and demands pedagogy that addresses both the linguistic and the academic needs of ESL students in college. College ESL students need instruction that will facilitate the development of their English language skills to enable them to meet quickly the requisite levels of linguistic proficiency. This instruction must also prepare these students to enter and to succeed in mainstream college courses. Yet, for ESL students to succeed in the academic mainstream, they must be able to do more than identify a vocabulary item, hold a simple conversation, or find the main idea of a reading passage. They must be able to use the English language as a means for acquiring knowledge, in the process engaging in the active analysis, interpretation, critique, and synthesis of information presented in English (Kasper, 1996; Pally, 1997).

THE CONTENT-BASED MODEL OF ESL INSTRUCTION

Recent studies (Benesch, 1988; Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Crandall, 1995; CUNY Language Forum and CUNY ESL Council, 1992; Kasper, 1994, 1997) have provided both empirical and anecdotal evidence demonstrating that content-based college ESL instruction effectively increases students' English language proficiency, teaches them the skills necessary for success in mainstream college courses, and helps to ease their transition from the sheltered ESL program to the academic mainstream. In a content-based course, ESL students use English to expand their existing knowledge bases (Kasper, 1998), as they are presented with interdisciplinary material in a meaningful, contextualized form in which the primary focus is on the acquisition of content area information (Brinton et al., 1989). The result of this type of instruction is that ESL students gradually acquire greater control of the English language, enabling them to participate more fully in an increasingly complex academic and social environment (Kasper & Singer, 1997).

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS VOLUME

This book is meant to inform and to train readers, be they graduate students in MATESOL (Master of Arts In Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) programs, ESL faculty, or college administrators, in the techniques of content-based instruction (CBI). The goal of each of the chapters in the book is to offer information, suggestions, and instructional tools grounded in theory and practice that will assist readers' efforts to develop content-based materials and programs appropriate to their educational institutions and situations.

The essays in this volume speak to the many and varied issues in content-based college ESL instruction, and as such are divided among three sections: Laying the Groundwork for a Content-Based Pedagogy; Building English Language Skills through Content-Based Instruction; and Incorporating Technology into Content-Based Instruction.

One of the key concerns in college ESL instruction involves how to assess students' progress. This is especially true in a CBI context where assessment becomes a multifaceted task that involves the evaluation of both linguistic and content knowledge. Because assessment is a critical factor in determining both instructional design and student performance, each chapter in this book addresses assessment issues as they apply to the particular methodology described therein.

PART I: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR A CONTENT-BASED PEDAGOGY

The four chapters in this section offer a foundation for the design and implementation of content-based college ESL instruction as they speak to various issues of educational theory and practice and address the concerns of ESL students and faculty. Chapter 1, "Content-Based College ESL Instruction: Theoretical Foundations and Pedagogical Applications," responds to the question most critical to the focus of this volume: Why content-based college ESL instruction? In this chapter, I offer an answer that is grounded within the framework of second language acquisition research and cognitive theory. I also discuss practical considerations that must be addressed when designing and implementing content-based programs, such as choosing an appropriate CBI model, training faculty, and developing reliable and valid assessments.

Chapter 1 describes several different CBI models, and the success of any of these models is dependent on effective administration. In chapter 2, "Keys to Successful Content-Based Programs: Administrative Perspectives," Marcia Babbitt and Rebecca Mlynarczyk provide a detailed treatment of the many and

varied administrative issues inherent in content-based college ESL programs. They maintain that developing an effective content-based program requires a great deal of planning, cooperation, and coordination. Drawing on their experience as codirectors of the ESL program at Kingsborough Community College/CUNY, Babbitt and Mlynarczyk make suggestions for how to deal with issues such as student recruitment, curriculum development, and program evaluation and fine-tuning.

With the spread of CBI as a paradigm in second and foreign language instruction, it has become increasingly important to build exposure to this paradigm into teacher training programs. In chapter 3, “Out of the Mouths of Babes: Novice Teacher Insights into Content-Based Instruction,” Donna Brinton discusses the hands-on experience with CBI that is built into the master’s in applied linguistics program at the University of California, Los Angeles in the introductory Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) methods course and the field practicum in TESL. As a component of both courses, students participate in e-mail dialogue journal exchanges with the course instructor and their peers. Brinton’s chapter examines these dialog journal interchanges as they pertain to the novice teachers’ reactions to CBI and the light that these comments shed on the challenges of preparing teachers to effectively implement CBI.

The first three chapters are written from the perspective of ESL faculty committed to a CBI paradigm. In chapter 4, “ESL Students in the Mainstream: Observations From Content-Area Faculty,” Judith Rosenthal, a Kean University biology professor, speaks from the perspective of a mainstream instructor and takes the position that all faculty, whatever their academic discipline, must contribute to the development of English language proficiency by nonnative speakers. As she describes how CBI instruction facilitates ESL students’ transition into the mainstream, Rosenthal seeks to raise readers’ awareness of the types of classroom activities and practices that fail to take into consideration the linguistic needs of ESL students and makes specific suggestions for how mainstream faculty may assist the ESL students in their classes.

PART II: BUILDING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS THROUGH CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

The four chapters in the second section of the book each offer concrete suggestions for content-based pedagogical activities that may be used to build English language skills and prepare ESL students for the demands of the college mainstream. The activities described in these chapters are directed toward ESL students from the lower levels to the more advanced, and target a variety of skills, each essential to students’ linguistic and academic progress.

The development of grammatical proficiency is a major linguistic concern for both teachers and ESL students at all levels of instruction. In chapter 5,

“Grammar in Content-Based Instruction,” Peter Master maintains that attention to grammar within the areas of content being studied is necessary if ESL students are to acquire the cognitive academic language proficiency necessary for college level work. He believes that because CBI focuses on the use of language to convey thoughts and ideas, it offers many meaningful contexts within which students can develop grammatical competence. Master discusses some of these content-based contexts and provides examples of how to teach the grammatical system through them.

As we attempt to prepare ESL students for the academic mainstream through content-based programs, we must remember that course materials need to be made accessible to all students. Because many colleges and universities have begun to strictly limit the number of semesters a student may remain in developmental courses, accessibility is an especially critical issue for lower level ESL students who need to develop English language proficiency more rapidly than ever before. In spite of this fact, all too often CBI is not made available to lower level ESL students because the language generally found in content-based materials is deemed too difficult for these students. However, topical short stories can provide an excellent foundation for introducing content-based topics, and subsequently academic texts themselves, into lower level ESL courses. In chapter 6, “The Short Story as a Bridge to Content in the Lower Level ESL Course,” I offer a blueprint for how to use short stories to introduce academic content into lower level courses.

Visual media such as film also offer unique benefits to ESL students endeavoring to become proficient readers, writers, listeners, and speakers of the English language. Film imagery, integrated into the content-based college ESL course, may be used to provide reinforcement and clarification of concepts presented in related print texts. Whether viewing the complete film or excerpted sequences, ESL students benefit from a graphic, visual illustration of key critical thinking concepts, thus making subject matter more concrete (Kasper & Singer, 1997). The structure and content of film can also serve as a visual model for various modes of written discourse. In chapter 7, “Film Imagery: A Visual Resource for Clarifying Content and Developing Academic Writing Skill,” I describe how film may be used to clarify content, and I discuss how it may also be used to teach various forms of academic writing, such as comparison–contrast, cause–effect, and argumentation.

Finally, although there are a relatively large number of content-based materials that target the development of reading and writing skills, there are few that address listening and speaking skills. This is unfortunate because academic success requires competence not only in reading and writing, but also in listening and speaking. Sharon Myers believes that because commercially produced materials do not often meet student needs, teacher-prepared materials are essential to fill the gap. In chapter 8, “Speaking Science: Developing ESL

Materials for University Students in Academic Disciplines," Myers illustrates how ESL students' listening and speaking skills may be effectively developed through teacher-created audio recordings that are designed with students' level of English, content area interest(s), and background knowledge in mind.

PART III: INCORPORATING TECHNOLOGY INTO CONTENT-BASED INSTRUCTION

Modern computer applications have expanded the body of instructional resources available to faculty and students, and the four chapters included in this section each describe how CBI may be enhanced through computer-based activities. Hypertext applications incorporated in e-mail, the Internet, and the World Wide Web offer powerful tools for integrating language and content. Using the computer provides students with increased possibilities for cooperative learning contexts in which all participants benefit from improved language and content skills as they gather information and share knowledge.

Although ESL students may study within an English-speaking environment, few classes or assignments encourage or require their active interaction with native speakers. Joy Egbert believes that CBI incorporating community-based field experience can create a learning context that supports real-world language use and that promotes intercultural understanding. She further believes that this experience may be broadened and strengthened through computer-based activities. In chapter 9, "Computers as Content and Context in a Cross-Cultural Language Field Experience," Egbert describes her "Kids and Computers" course, which brought together college ESL and local elementary school students in an intercultural exchange that addressed the issues of cultural diversity, technology use, and authentic English language practice through both face-to-face interaction and e-mail communication.

ESL students, in particular, can benefit greatly from e-mail exchanges that provide the opportunity for students to practice both writing and reading skills in the process of sharing knowledge, experience, and culture with other students who may live across the country or even the world. In chapter 10, "The Keyboard to Success: An ESL/Basic Writing Internet Partnership," David Tillyer and Louise Wood describe their experiences working together for three semesters on an intercultural e-mail exchange that paired nonnative speakers from an ESL class in New York with native speakers from a Basic Writing (BW) class in South Carolina. Tillyer and Wood explain their reasons for participating in the exchange, describe the process of conducting one, consider problems encountered, enumerate positive outcomes, and offer guidelines for a productive e-mail intercultural exchange.

The Internet contains the largest body of content-based resources in history, and incorporating Internet technology into ESL courses can provide stu-

dents with a richer and more valuable educational experience as they are encouraged to interact with language in new and varied ways (Pennington, 1996). In chapter 11, "The Internet and Content-Based College ESL Instruction: Reading, Writing, and Research," I offer a rationale and provide concrete guidelines for using the Internet to teach and refine English language, critical literacy, and academic skills through a content-based activity I call *focus discipline research*.

The first three chapters in this section describe how technology may be used to enrich CBI. Although enriching instruction is important, incorporating technology into content-based courses fulfills an educational need far more critical to ESL students' future progress.

Technological literacy now counts among the basic skills necessary for success not only in college, but also in the workplace. This means that to be prepared for the demands of the academic mainstream, and subsequently for the workforce, students must be able to use technology to gather and manage information. I conclude the book with chapter 12, "The Role of Information Technology in the Future of Content-Based ESL Instruction," which discusses why and how information technology should be made an integral component of content-based ESL courses, taking into account the needs and concerns of college faculty, administrators, and students.

A FINAL NOTE

The 12 chapters in this volume seek to provide readers with a broad view of the growing field of content-based ESL instruction. Each of the authors has drawn from his or her personal and classroom experiences with this instructional methodology to offer a comprehensive treatment of issues key to the success of ESL students in college, as well as concrete suggestions for how to implement CBI most effectively. We hope that our readers will find this information useful and call on it in their efforts to empower college ESL students to become full members of the English-speaking academic community.

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Loretta F. Kasper is the owner and moderator of Content-ESL, an e-mail listserv that provides a forum for discussion of issues in Content-Based ESL and an avenue of communication for students and faculty participating in content-based projects. If you wish to subscribe to this list, please send an empty e-mail message to: content-esl-subscribe@egroups.com

Additional information on this list may be found at: <http://members.aol.com/Drlfk/Content-ESL.html>

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Laying the Groundwork for a Content-Based Pedagogy