

English for Specific Purposes and Content Teacher Collaboration:

Report on a pilot Project.

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Abstract

The aim of this report is to discuss a pilot project of cooperation between the English for Specific Purposes practitioner and the teacher of Business Organization, put into practice for the interfaculty degree in *Mediterranean food-and-wine Sciences and Health* at the University of Messina. The main aim was to increase students' motivation in learning a foreign language and to exploit the possibilities offered by content-based instruction. The general implementation moved from previous exposure to topics presented by the content teacher in the mother tongue and then revisited in the foreign language by means of in-house built materials.

Keywords: Content-based instruction, English for specific purposes teacher, Content teacher, Cooperation.

Introduction

The rationale for English for specific/academic purposes courses (ESP/EAP) in Higher Education (HE) wishes to implement language instruction taking into account specific educational needs (Dudley-Evans, 2001). Such didactic aims can be fostered by content-based instruction (CBI), a valuable approach which enhances both language acquisition and academic success (Kasper, 1997; Song, 2006) by the “incorporation of content material into language classes” (Kavaliauskienė, 2004). This matching of language and content also broadens cross-curricular awareness and specific knowledge (Stryker and Stoller, 1997:5) to be spent both to improve academic studies or for the world of work.

At university level, and in English as foreign Language (EFL) contexts, this integration increases language proficiency as CBI makes students realize how the discourses pertaining to their field of specialization are organized in the target foreign language. This approach highly motivates EFL learners since it can draw on knowledge already acquired in subject disciplines (Widdowson, 1978; 1979; 1983) and applies even to freshmen because they do not reach higher education totally blank. On the contrary, bring with them both content and foreign language expertise (Widdowson, 1979: 44).

Although the matching of language and content has a high face value in motivating students, CBI implementation opens the way to what has been defined “the ESP teachers’ subject knowledge dilemma” (Wu and Badger, 2009) since CBI implies that ESP professionals have to tread specialistic paths. Such areas are often outside the remit of language teachers as their training usually revolves around English language teaching (ELT) practices (Čepon, 2005:50). This bias can have a two-fold solution: either the ESP practitioner consults a colleague expert in the field, or asks the same for a deeper collaboration.

As concerns the latter issue, Dudley-Evans and St. Johns (1998:43-48) acknowledge the importance of such an engagement and recognize three different stages upon which this joint work can take place: *cooperation*, *collaboration* and *team-teaching*.

The first stage, or *cooperation*, witnesses the ESP teacher to take the initiative and to enquire about the students’ fields of specialism to design an appropriate program of study.

The second step, that of *collaboration*, plans for a more direct involvement of the subject teacher to validate the syllabus content by devising common materials, whereas the third stage, *team-teaching*, implies a stricter conjoined work in the classroom, where each educator provides his/her own expertise in the field.

Team-teaching is, of course, the most suitable way of instruction for the benefits on language and content knowledge acquisition widely discussed in literature (Song, 2006; Stryker and Stoller, 1997). It involves - on both teachers’ side - willingness to collaborate (Jordan, 1997:121), mutual respect, together with openness and flexibility (Dudley-Evans and St. Johns 1998: 47) as concerns one’s own personal didactic approach to the discipline and, on the content teacher’s side, an interest in the foreign language (Almagro Esteban and Vallejo Martos, 2002:10; Dudley-Evans and St. Johns 1998:47).

The Project

1. University course structure

The interfaculty degree in *Mediterranean food-and-wine Sciences and Health* is a HE course established in the academic year 2006/2007 with the concurrence of seven Faculties (Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Biological Sciences, Pharmacy, Economics, Law, Political Sciences) of the University of Messina. It aims at training competent experts in the food-and-wine remit, like catering, or food related fields such as food production and distribution, quality evaluation and control, Mediterranean niche products, economics, marketing, and Italian and European regulations as well (for a more detailed description see the University website). The overall syllabus is organized around lectures, problem based activities, case studies and seminars.

The English course, scheduled at the first year, has been targeted by the University board at the B1/B2 level of the *Common European Framework*, for the written and spoken skills, respectively. Basically, it is a course which develops in a context where mainstream lectures are given in Italian and which concentrates on delayed needs. This means that the ESP teacher has to provide instruction considering future academic and workplace requirements to be used by students to access, say, foreign literature for the final project work or to be used after graduation for the profession.

The drawback emerging from this study situation, and common to many EFL countries (Dudley- Evans and St. Johns, 1998: 39-41), is that students find it difficult to consider the ESP activities motivating as too much detached from their present learning situation.

2. Rationale for the pilot project

To overcome this motivational shortcoming and to exploit different teaching methods, the CBI approach was deemed a suitable solution to stimulate a linguistically non homogeneous group of freshmen, struggling to find their way between HE requirements and study habits peculiar to secondary school instruction.

Although it is common ESP practice to rely on themes taken from content areas and to develop them for communicative teaching purpose, the idea behind this project was that of finding interdisciplinary cooperation to achieve a balance between language and content (Stryker and Stoller, 1997:286).

3. *Project design*

Once ascertained the interdisciplinary cooperation between the ESP expert and Business Organization colleague, the first step was to find topics to lay the ground on which the project could be built up. These themes had to be sound by a disciplinary point of view, but had also to bring educational benefits to ensure growth in foreign language proficiency.

Such a quest implied first of all a careful examination of the Business Organization syllabus, its expected outcomes and the educational approach the content teacher had outlined for the discipline. From this co-work it emerged that a good issue to work on was the *life cycle of organizations*. This theory on the life cycle of entrepreneurial organizations moves from a parallel with human beings in terms of startup, growth and decay; it was discussed and brought out by Greiner's research (1972) and is to date considered the cornerstone from which present perspectives still move. Greiner's model highlights the main organizational features in terms of proceedings and control; this metaphor, at the same time, helps students realize how organizational issues and management tasks can be put into practice.

The theme satisfied the ESP teacher because it offered the learning group communicative language exploitation which could also be used to develop further interdisciplinary links with other majors in the first year curriculum like the life cycle of plants, a topic dealt with in biology.

The second step was to consider some intertwined variables to shape the general outline, once the common topic had been agreed on: teaching and timetabling, materials, evaluation. When all these issues were discussed and activities scheduled, it was determined to implement a trial project and to pilot it to draw from this experience the know-how to be used in future years for more articulated plans.

As concerns the issue of teaching and timetabling, we agreed to deliver content first in Italian and in English in a second time. The rationale behind such a decision was twofold. The first follows Widdowson's (1979) suggestion that communicative competence in foreign languages can be enhanced by the previous content knowledge students bring in the EFL classroom; the second reason was related to a practical difficulty that is the impossibility to plan co-joined lectures because the overall timetable scheme had already been set by the University Board.

The selection of English materials took a longer time because this is the most important part of any CBI plan and success or failure is deeply influenced by the resources learners have to work

on. Our quest did not look for the acquisition of content knowledge, an issue already satisfied by the Business Organization teacher's lectures; on the contrary, the texts were to serve our pilot project to let students realize how content discussed by the subject expert was dealt with in the target foreign language. This meant that we had to look for English excerpts which made the activation of prior "knowledge, interest and curiosity" possible (Pérez Canado and Almagro Estaban, 2005: 40), together with the language development drills in the remit of ESP classes.

This was not an easy task if one considers that specialist literature is not written for language teaching purposes (Jordan, 1997:113). Moreover, English materials to serve the purposes of CBI experiments have to satisfy other issues, i.e. they have to be appropriate to the language proficiency students do possess to avoid the feeling of dealing with something "too far over their heads" (Stryker and Stoller: 307). Texts have also to be seen by learners as having a direct bearing on their learning efforts, that is they have to be considered meaningful (Widdowson, 1983: 91). Last, but not least, language texts have to facilitate communicative interaction in the ESP classes for language's sake.

The further step was to choose a text to work on compliant with all the features outlined above. Unfortunately, none answering all the cues was found, a backwash practitioners face when looking for the "perfect text" to serve ESP classes (Swales, 2009). Therefore, we had to opt for in-house built materials.

The three reference works on which we draw our supplies were Greiner, *Evolution and revolution as organizations grows* (1972), Daft, *Organization Theory and Design* (2007), this one already on the reading list in the content teacher's syllabus, and Sundarasaradula and Hasan (2004), *A unified open systems model for explaining organizational Change*, taken from the Internet.

The last issue to be accounted for this pilot scheme concerned evaluation. In our situation and considering the experimental feature the project had, the administering of profit tests was not deemed a suitable solution to avoid the group an excessive workload, and not to give our students the idea that the co-joined work was simply an exam driven occasion.

In some instances, questionnaires have been administered to check learners' opinion. Even this last possibility was not taken into account because it can both lead subjects to show off or to give unanswered items.

In our pilot it was, therefore, decided to interview learners by an informal and friendly chat. From this talk it emerged that students did appreciate our CBI project because it gave them a good amount of confidence on their foreign language skills and because it made the overall comprehension of the English text easier, thanks to the previous exposure.

Such a positive appreciation was deemed by both teachers a good result, in line with the overall goals of our project.

Conclusion

Results from this pilot project ranged within those reported in literature: CBI is a successful means to develop foreign language learning by exploiting the possibilities offered by content knowledge.

What we learned from this experience is that team-teaching can be used for the degree in *Mediterranean food-and-wine Sciences and Health* if true co-working is put into practice. Such examples of team-teaching pretty well answer the interfaculty educational process which encourage interdisciplinary educational aims, in line with the objectives brought out by the European Community.

This first and piloting cooperation was extremely positive as both teachers got an insight on the learning teaching process when learning aims are shared. We got experience on working with others and on building reliable materials conforming to specialist and language requirements.

Further steps, will regard evaluation of present outcomes and the implementation of a system of interdisciplinary team-teaching, in the remit of catering, HACCP and quality management.

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