Widening the Circle: Teaching English for Specific Purposes in the Light of Content-Based Instruction

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Abstract

Language instruction based on content is not a new idea; it originated in English-speaking countries such as the USA, Canada, and many European countries that study content subjects in English. Accordingly, it has become a widely adopted pedagogical approach to English for Academic Purposes. The teaching of English to speakers of other languages, including Algeria, however, abounds with multiple acronyms, causing teachers to become confused, and even disoriented when considering English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes, and Content-Based Instruction. The rationale of this purely theoretical-based article is to understand the current pedagogical practices in language across the curriculum and strive to unearth and uncover how English for Specific Purpose courses can be taught by implementing Content-based Instruction as a syllabus, by reviewing some linguistic, and pedagogical rationales as well as principles for the application of this framework for foreign language learners in higher education, more precisely in the ESP context. Besides, the study suggests some teaching models that are meant to help English language instructors to be content teachers in some circumstances and language-competent teachers in other contexts.

Keywords: Content-Based Instruction; teacher; Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

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1. Introduction

Needless to say, in recent times, and boosted by the globalization process, the unprecedented teaching spread of English throughout the world has resulted in its major role and high prestige in the academic, cultural, and political landscape of a growing number of countries (Fishman et al., 1977). Even though from the pedagogical perspective, its teaching (similar to most human occupational approaches) can be tiresome; it remains undoubtedly a rewarding activity because of its prestigious and international role in miscellaneous fields including economic relations, and cultural exchange with foreign countries. People want to study English because it offers a chance for advancement in their professional lives.

Practically speaking, language teacher duties comprise vocabulary, grammar, rules, and other essential aspects of governing the English language. Nevertheless, the focus of the recent research has switched from characterizing the formal aspects of language usage to figuring out how language is used in authentic conversation (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987)**,** where social media reigns supreme and can transform a person into a sales manager or a technology specialist overnight, a language teacher must recognize that certain aspects of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) (Shirav, 2023).

1.1. Purpose of study

In the context of teaching/learning English, the demand for English for specific/ special purposes continues to increase and expand throughout the world not only in countries where English serves as a native language but also in other countries where it is used as a second/foreign language. Therefore, it is essential to consider the following sub-problems:

- How can instructors teach effectively English as a second/foreign language?
- Are they supposed to teach English for special/ specific purposes the same way teachers for general/ Academic purposes do?
- Can we consider ESP, EGP, and CBI as distant relations or closely related cousins?
- How can CBI be a beneficial syllabus in both ESP and EGP courses?

2. Method and materials

This study reviews some linguistic, and pedagogical rationales as well as principles for the application of the framework for foreign language learners in higher education, more precisely in the English for Specific Purpose context. The study and its findings pose no ethical risk to the environment, humans, or organizations.

3. Results

3.1. What is English for Specific Purposes and English for General Purposes? Definitions and Distinctive Features

The ever-increasing global interest in the dissemination of English language education has led to significant changes in English language teaching (ELT) in recent decades. Consequently, ELT has endeavored to cater to the unique needs and demands of academic and professional learners (Richards, 2001; Karim et al., 2023). This necessitates a fresh perspective on a particular facet of English language instruction, resulting in the emergence of English for specific purposes (EAP, EOP, EST).

Therefore, within the field of education, more specifically ELT context, teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) abounds with a veritable "alphabet soup" of acronyms (Brinton, 2012): English language teaching (ELT), English-language learners (ELLs), English for general purposes (EGP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and content-based instruction (CBI), to name just a few. ESP is particularly rich in acronyms that describe its various sub-disciplines: English for science and

technology (EST), English for business and economics (EBE), English for legal purposes (ELP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), and so on (Brinton, 2012).

Pegged to this section and striving to clearly understand the common and different points between English for General Purposes and English for Specific Purposes, Wright (1992) explains that General English is concerned with everyday life assuming that "*these universal topics are socializing shopping traveling eating out, telephoning friends ...so when one learns a language one must be exposed to linguistic items relating to universal topics. This is the task of the General English course*".

Also called '*TENOR- the teaching of English for No Obvious Reason*' (Abbot, 1981 in Jordan, 1997), English for General Purposes applies to those English language learning contexts where learners have no obvious recognizable reason to learn the language.

In the same line of thought,' Hutchinson & Waters (1987) answer this quite simply, *"in theory nothing, in practice a great deal"*. In its most simplified terms, English for General Purposes (EGP) is said to provide a broad foundation rather than detailed specifications of goals. (Hutchinson & Waters 1987). According to Widdowson (1983), there exist some distinctive features underlying EGP which are listed as follows:

- The focus is often on education;
- As the learners' future needs are impossible to predict, the course content is more difficult to select;
- Due to the above point, the content in the syllabus needs to have a high surrender value.

Concerning ESP, it is an approach rather than a product… as it does not involve a particular type of language, teaching materials, or methodology (Hutchinson and Waters 1987) and which according to Strevens (1988) comprises some absolute and variable characteristics. The former (absolute variable) is designed; To meet the specified needs of the learner; Related in content (i.e., themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations, and activities; Centered on the language appropriate for those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, and semantics.

The latter (variable characteristics of ESP) may be restricted to the language skills to be learned (reading only); and the use of no teaching methodology (Popescu, 2010). The most relevant ESP features, according to Widdowson (1983) are:

- The focus is on training;
- As English is intended to be used in specific vocational contexts, the selection of the appropriate content is easier;
- It is important for the content in the syllabus to have a high surrender value, most relevant to the vocational context;

These distinctive features reveal the true nature of EGP and ESP. In a nutshell, from the practical/ pedagogical perspective, while EGP teachers are not supposed to conduct a needs analysis to explore their students' needs, wants, and expectations, ESP Teachers do insist on that and are aware of the importance of needs analysis so that to reach the desired outcomes of their learning processes at all stages of materials production (Kenny et al., 2020). Perhaps this demonstrates the influence that the ESP approach has had on English teaching in general. The line between where General English courses stop and ESP courses start has become very vague indeed (Anthony, 2018).

Regardless of what has been said about points of contrast between ESP and EGP, one may assert that the methodology applied in ESP contexts can also be used in EGP contexts as they share many similarities in terms of methodology knowing that this last is dominated by the content be it the case of ESP or EGP. All in all, striving to recapitulate what has been stated earlier, one may consider the following table that juxtaposes the differences between the two acronyms (Table 1):

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Table 1

EG &ESP Characteristics in a Glance

General English (EGP)	English for Specific Purposes (ESP)
• Aim-oriented language learning • Provides a basis for ESP (Wappa & Gladstone 2019) • Likely to be designed for learners at all levels, irrespective of age (Popescu, 2010) • The course content is more challenging to select due to the unpredictable future needs of learners (Widdowson, 1983) • Open to the learning of all language skills.	• Objective-oriented language is "Purpose-related orientation" (Wappa,2019). • More focused and closely related specific disciplines (Whyte& Sarré 2017) • Present pre-set skill training in a well-framed format for a specific time and target • Likely to be designed for learners at all levels, irrespective of age (Popescu, 2010). • Often restricted to the specific learning skills only

Source: Khan (2017)

3.2. Definition of CBA: An Evolving Architecture of CBI

Recently, Content-Based Instruction or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become increasingly popular as a means of developing linguistic ability. Its integration has attracted many authors in the field of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning. As its name suggests, it is a variety of instructional models in which academic subject matter is taught in a second or foreign language using linking language and content (Yu & Kaur 2024). From the historical standpoint, the idea of basing language teaching on content is not a new concept in the field of language teaching as it originated from English-speaking countries such as the US, Canada, and European countries whose children study content subjects in English, there has been increased attention in the recent decades in it as it has proven very valuable and prominent at all levels of schooling and in postsecondary education around the world.

Comparatively speaking, unlike traditional language classes which resemble music classes where the learners are not allowed to play any real pieces until they have the proficiency to give a recital, in CBI classes, students learn a language by using language –like playing real pieces- as a means of communication (Canbay, 2006).

In more accurate terms, studying content subjects and the English language simultaneously necessitates the cooperation and collaboration of content and language teachers. CBI as described by Snow (2016) …*is an umbrella term for a multifaceted approach to SFL teaching that differs in terms of factors such as educational setting, program objectives, and target population but shares a common point of departure—the integration of language teaching aims with content instruction.*

3.3. Principles and Distinctive Characteristics of Content-Based Instruction (CBI)

Regarding factors characterizing CBI, it is important to note that its principles are deeply rooted in the principles of Communicative Language Teaching. This is because CBI involves the active participation of students in the exchange of content (Villalobos, 2013, p.73). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), there are two important principles that CBI relies on. Firstly, second language acquisition is more successful when the language is used as a means of acquiring information. Secondly, CBI better aligns with learners' needs for acquiring a second language. Building on this, Brinton (2001) further expands on these ideas and complements the arguments put forward by Richards and Rogers (2001). These are:

1. *Base instructional decisions on content rather than language criteria*: the content is determined by the pedagogical decisions selected correctly and in sequence. Concerning this, Brinton (2003) points out that CBI "*allows the choice of content to dictate or influence the selection and sequencing of language elements*".

2. *Integrate Skills*: CBI possesses a comprehensive range of skills for effective language instruction. This methodology also incorporates the simultaneous teaching of various skills, mirroring real-world scenarios.

3. *Engage students actively in all stages of the learning process*: CBI emphasizes the student rather than the teacher (learners' centeredness). In other words, students are supposed to rely solely on themselves, rather than the teacher, to guide their learning journey. In the CBI classroom, students play an active role in constructing knowledge.

4. *Select content that is relevant to students' lives, interests, and/or academic objectives*: the content should be tailored to meet the students' needs and the educational context.

5. *Choose authentic texts and tasks*: by incorporating authentic materials into the curriculum, the original purpose of these materials may be altered. However, the use of authentic materials promotes the acquisition of the target culture.

3.4. The Three Prototype Models of CBI

A variety of CBI models are currently in use and can be implemented in different scenarios (Brinton & Snow, 2003 & Brinton et al., 1989) namely: *theme-based, sheltered, and adjunct models.* Despite the differences they have in terms of settings, levels, and the extent of language and content, these educational models share three essential characteristics:

- They are based on a subject-matter core,
- They use authentic language and texts (with "authentic texts" defined as those primarily produced for native speakers, and
- They are tailored to the needs of specific groups of students,

CBI has the potential to exist in various models including *theme-based instruction, sheltered content instruction, and adjunct instruction.* To have a better insight into content-based instruction, one should know the models that are present in CBI. These models are as follows:

3.4.1. Theme Based Models

The theme-based model is a language-driven approach that focuses on topics chosen to meet students' needs and interests. Essentially, this instructional model focuses on language learning around a central theme (e.g., nutrition, music, dance). As an example, under the supervision of a language teacher students work on the topic "picnic", and by doing certain activities, they get familiar with the concept of picnic and its related registers and jargon (Das, 2016).

In very precise and concise terms, and from the practical side teachers and instructors via this model, should give equal importance to account for academic concepts and language skills at the same time. In this regard, Stoller and Grabe (1997) proposed the Six T-s approach as a means to establish coherence in Content-based instruction. These strategies can be effectively implemented within a theme-based model.

- *Themes*: The major ideas around which the units are organized are themes determined by taking students" interests, needs and likes, relevance, and institutional appropriateness into account.
- Topics: Subunits of themes are topics. A theme may subsume several topics organized/building one topic on the other arranged in a synchronized manner.
- *Texts*: language in the classroom is presented in meaningful texts. Stoller and Grabe (1997) claim that "… *students i*nterest, *relevance, and instructional appropriateness, length, coherence, connection to other materials, accessibility, availability, and cost are important."*
- *Tasks*: Students can develop valuable study skills, such as note-taking, summarizing, and extracting key information from texts through tasks. They may also develop skills in synthesizing, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Tajeddin & Mansouri 2024).

- *Transition*s: Curricular coherence is provided by transitions. Topics and tasks are linked smoothly by transitions.
- Threads: Another curricular coherence is provided by threads. They are defined by natural linkages across themes. They help students to recycle content, use learning strategies, and synthesize (Stoller &Grabe, 1997).

3.4.2. Sheltered Model

In contrast, the sheltered model focuses on content and is commonly employed in university settings where ESL students are enrolled in regular subject courses alongside native speakers. The underlying principle of the sheltered CBI program is not only to help students achieve a certain degree of mastery of the subject matter but also to impart both subject-specific knowledge and language skills, including Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing, to reach such an important aim, CBI EFL teachers must prioritize assessment and evaluation, just like their ESL counterparts. In CBI, continuous assessment is crucial, and teachers can employ methods such as daily quizzes, journals, and direct oral feedback (Davies, 2003). The teaching philosophy of CBI EFL teachers is centered around the belief that learners are more motivated when they are engaged in communication, interesting topics, and content, and that learning should be enjoyable (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, theme-based CBI is considered the most effective teaching approach for integrating language and content learning

3.4.3. Adjunct Model

In the context of language instruction, the adjunct model refers to a method wherein students are enrolled in both a language course and a content course simultaneously, and receive specialized language courses alongside their content-based classes (Roquet et al., 2022). This model can also be utilized in EFL contexts, where EFL teachers possessing subject knowledge create diverse teaching activities to enhance students' language proficiency.

These courses are designed in a way that the materials and assignments are coordinated to support the students' learning in both courses. In the language course, second language learners may receive additional support, while in the content course; they may interact with native speakers. This model is commonly used at the university level, where the integration of courses is feasible. It is also a component of the broader Foreign Languages Across the Curriculum (FLAC) movement in U.S. universities.

To recapitulate the aforementioned contemporary and prototype models of CBI, it might seem wiser to consider Figure 1:

Figure 1
Content-Based Instruction Setting and Modals
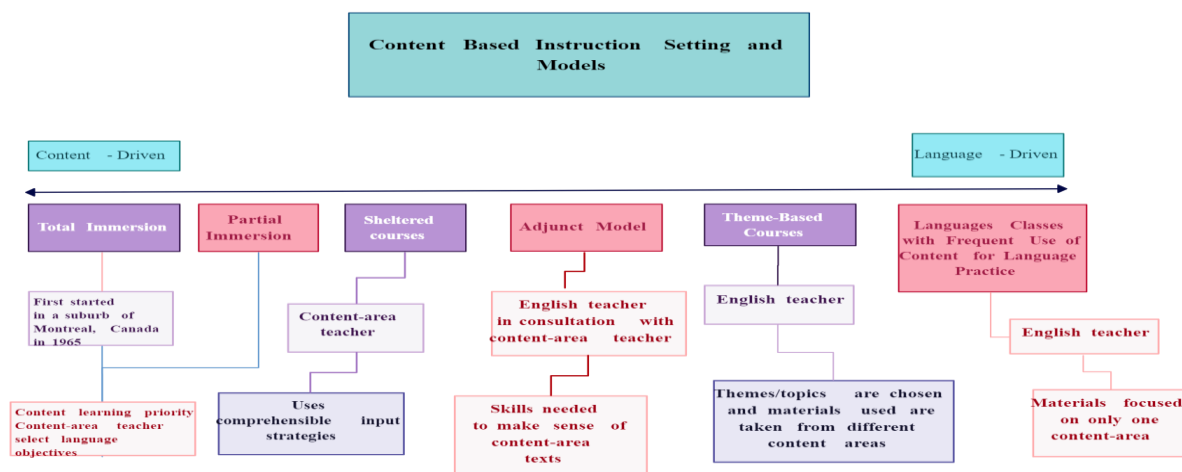
The three original prototype models, in general, persist to thrive. Nevertheless, they have persistently adjusted the environments in which they are employed, resulting in the emergence of numerous subordinate divisions.

3.5. Boundary Parameters ESP & CBI

In the early 1990s, there was extensive discourse surrounding the similarities and differences between ESP and CBI. Notable resemblances, as acknowledged by Johns (1992; 1997) and Brinton (1993), encompass the following:

1. ESP and CBI share dissatisfaction with the traditional abstraction of language from its natural environment and real language use.
2. They share a concern that general-purpose English courses cannot prepare students for the demanding linguistic, rhetorical, and contextual challenges of the real world.
3. They use genuine discourse from the real world to ensure that classroom content reflects the target situation.
4. They engage students in meaningful use of language rather than in activities that focus on the language itself.
5. They expand the definition of language teaching to include cognitive skills and critical thinking.
6. Finally, both ESP and CBI have as their goal the transfer of language skills and content to real life.

In an article first published in 1992 and subsequently reissued in 1997, Johns argues that the discrepancies in perspectives regarding the scope of ESP and CBI tend to be more substantial. Accordingly, he asserts that

1. ESP has a rich research tradition, unlike CBI, its younger cousin.
2. It serves adult language learners internationally, while CBI is anchored in the English-speaking world and is linked to K-12 settings
3. ESP courses often focus on one skill, while CBI courses favor an integrated, all-skills focus.
   ESP is grounded in linguistically oriented and textbook research, while CBI research is concerned with the immediate classroom and issues of pedagogy (e.g., student affect, materials/curriculum design, and instructional strategies).

3.6. The Difference between CBI and ESP

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When it comes to mentioning the relationship between ESP and CBI, certain researchers discuss the similarities and differences between ESP and CBI in terms of their concern for mainstream English courses. It is argued that mainstream instruction cannot adequately prepare students for the demands of the real world. Both ESP and CBI aim to enhance students' communicative competence and cognitive growth, as well as develop their critical thinking skills (Johns, 1992;1997).

Nonetheless, Johns (1992; 1997) argues that ESP has undergone a more thorough analysis and has received greater research support compared to the younger CBI. Additionally, Johns (1992;1997) asserts that ESP is effective for adult language learners in international settings, while CBI is primarily used in English-speaking countries and is more suitable for elementary and secondary education. CBI and ESP are implemented globally and there is ample research focused on sheltered instruction. Furthermore, CBI can be integrated into language programs at academic institutions, such as universities, as it addresses the academic needs of students.

4. Conclusion

It can be said that CBI and ESP as approaches to language teaching are far from being distant relatives but rather kissing cousins, having as mentioned by Brinton a symbiotic nature in the sense that the key aspect of CBI is that content is the point of departure or organizing principle of the course. This similarity between CBI and ESP makes it challenging to differentiate between them, as they operate at different levels within the field of ELT.

In this respect, recognizing CBI as a syllabus and ESP as a domain of ELT makes discrimination a bit difficult simply because they function at discrepant levels of ELT. Moreover, according to many scholars who share nearly the same viewpoints, CBI is seen as an efficient reservoir upon which ESP/EGP/EAP depend. In this line of thought, Brinton (2003) asserts that *". . . CBI can not only be a highly effective way of delivering EGP courses but can serve as an equally efficient organizing principle for EAP and ESP courses"*.

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