Content-Based Instruction vs. ESP

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Several attempts have been made recently to distinguish two important areas of English Language Teaching (ELT), namely content-based instruction (CBI) and English for Specific Purposes(ESP). I will describe CBI, contrast it to ESP, and propose a distinction between the two.

Features of CBI

The principal feature of CBI is that content is the point of departure or organizing principle of the course. To this end, CBI uses authentic (i.e., material not originally produced for language teaching purposes) tasks and materials, which often require much adaptation and supplementation for language-teaching purposes. CBI also emphasizes accommodation to language learners' needs through increased redundancy and exemplification and the use of advance organizers, frequent comprehension checks, and frequent, straightforward assignments and assessment procedures.

According to Brinton, Snow, & Wesche (1989), the most common models for CBI are theme-based, sheltered, and adjunct courses. The theme-based course is usually an ESL course with a content orientation (rather than focus) whose goal is L2 competence within specific topic areas. In the theme-based course, the language instructor is responsible for both language and content, but students are evaluated primarily on their L2 skills. The sheltered course is a content course whose goal is mastery of content material with only incidental language learning. The instructor is responsible for both language and content but students are evaluated primarily on their content mastery. The adjunct-model is a linked content and ESL course with two separate instructors. Its goal is both mastery of content material and the introduction to academic discourse with the aim of developing transferable skills. In the adjunct model, the language instructor is responsible for language while the content instructor is responsible for content. Students are evaluated on their L2 skills in the language class and on content mastery in

the content class.

Stoller & Grabe (in press) argue that "practically all instruction is theme-based" (p. 7). They argue that sheltered and adjunct instruction are "not alternatives to theme-based instruction [but] rather...two methods for carrying out theme-based instruction. For this reason, [they] see the two terms, content-based instruction and theme-based instruction, as interchangeable" (p. 7).

Distinction between CBI and ESP, Sheltered Content, and Real Content Courses

In my view, ESP is a division of ELT (English Language Teaching), the other being EGP (English for General Purposes). CBI, on the other hand, is a syllabus like the grammatical, notional/ functional/situational, rhetorical, and task-based syllabi (see Table 1). Robinson (1991) cites Breen(1987), who lists content as a base for a language syllabus, while Eskey

Table 1. General Categories in Each Syllabus Type

Grammatical	Notion/Function/Situation	Rhetorical	Content-Based	Task-Based
verb-related noun-related adverb-related sentence-combining discourse markers (genre)	semantico-grammatical modal-meaning communicative function situations (Wilkins 1976)	definition summary narrative classification description instructions (Trimble 1985)	social-science science mathematics business & industry health & home consumer education (Cantoni-Harvey 1987)	doing experiments drawing diagrams taking notes ordering information writing reports taking tests

(1992) directly labels CBI as a syllabus:

> The content-based syllabus is best viewed as a still newer attempt
> to extend and develop our conception of what a syllabus for a
> second-language course should comprise, including a concern with
> language form and language function, as well as a crucial third
> dimension-- the factual and conceptual content of such courses"
> (p. 14)

Wilkins (1976) described two basic kinds of syllabus, synthetic and analytic, and claimed that all syllabi lay somewhere between these two poles. The grammatical syllabus is synthetic (Wilkins 1976): "The learner's task is to re-synthesize the language that has been broken down into a large number of small pieces" (p. 2). The notional/functional syllabus is analytic. "Components of language are not seen as building blocks which have to be progressively

accumulated. Much greater variety of linguistic structure is permitted from the beginning and the learner's task is to approximate his own linguistic behavior more and more closely to the global language. Significant linguistic forms can be isolated from the structurally heterogeneous context in which they occur, so that learning can be focused on important aspects of the language structure. It is this process which is referred to as analytic. In general, however, structural considerations are secondary when decisions are being taken about the way in which the language to which the learner will be exposed is to be selected and organized" (p. 2). Parts of this description apply equally well to the content-based syllabus, which is also clearly analytic according to Wilkins' definition.

If CBI is a syllabus, it should be usable in both the EGP and the ESP divisions of ELT (see Table 2).

Table 2. Syllabus Inventory

Division	Syllabus	Sample from the Syllabus
EGP	grammatical	WH-questions; yes/no questions
ESP	grammatical	simple present tense for facts
EGP	notional/functional	information sought; (polite) request
ESP	notional/functional	definition; describing
EGP	rhetorical	chronological narrative
ESP	rhetorical	description of a process
EGP	content-based	consumer education (visitor information about San Francisco)
ESP	content-based	science (information about photosynthesis)
EGP	task-based	plan a trip to San Francisco (make a map, itinerary); write a chronological narrative
ESP	task-based	experiment to determine effect of sunlight on starch content in a leaf; write a description of a process

The course types Brinton, et al. (1989) describe as CBI teaching models make use of varying percentages of the other syllabi (see Figure 1 below) since a "pure" syllabus (e.g., entirely grammatical, entirely content-based) may be considered inappropriate for use
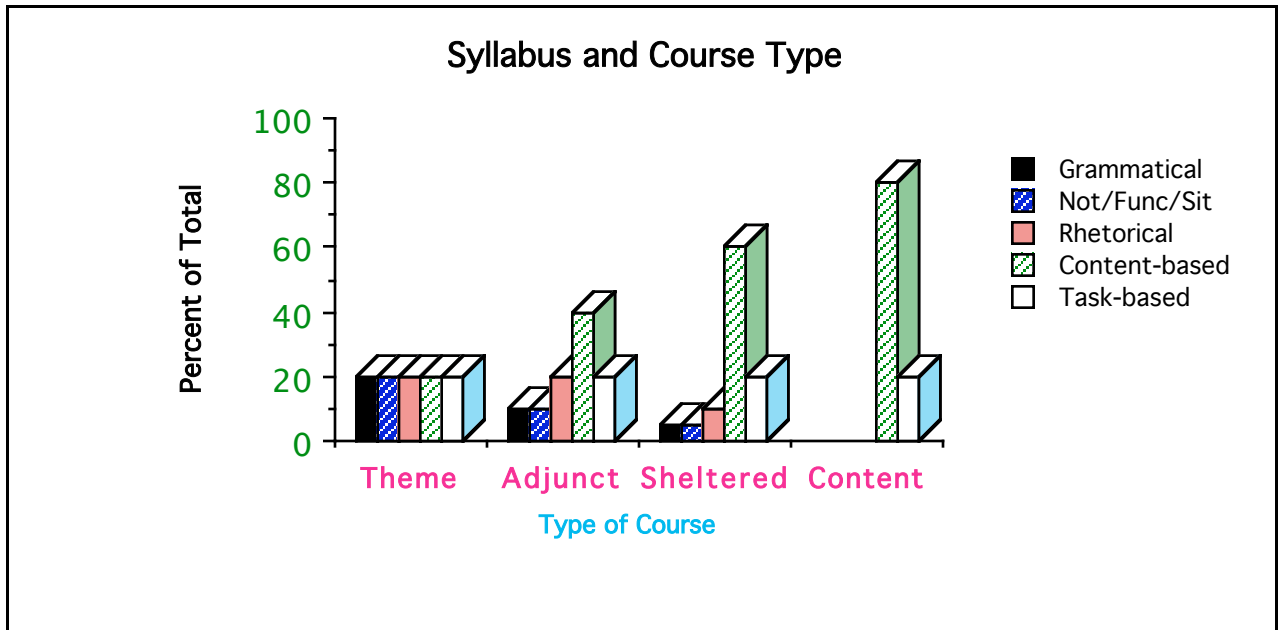
Fig. 1 Syllabus and Course Type

with NNS in these days of eclectic approaches to ELT. Only theme-based courses can really be EGP (though presumably the theme could be science or some other ESP domain). Sheltered, adjunct, and content courses are clearly ESP.

Conclusion

I have tried to clarify the distinction between CBI and ESP by defining CBI as a syllabus and ESP as a domain of ELT. An earlier article in this column (Brinton 1993) tried to define the difference between the two as one of underlying philosophy. My argument is that the two are basically not comparable as they operate at different levels in the ELT hierarchy. ESP is simply a domain of ELT that makes substantial use of the CBI syllabus.

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