INTEGRATING ESL IN THE CURRICULUM AND IN THE FACULTY

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Although content-based ESL has been advocated by practitioners in the field for over 15 years (Mohan 1986; Brooks 1988; Guyer & Peterson 1988; Brinton, Snow & Wesche 1989; Iancu 1993; Cargill 1996; Sagliano & Greenfield 1998, among others), very few universities in Australia offer such courses for credit*. One reason for the paucity of integrated ESL courses in most universities is that current tertiary infrastructures preclude effective inter-faculty collaboration. Content specialists usually work in their particular departments, and language instructors are most often found in separately housed student support centres. Researchers who advocate a content-based ESL curriculum invariably highlight effective inter-faculty collaboration as being central to the success of the course (Benesch 1988; Guyer & Peterson 1988; Cargill 1996; Pantelides 1999; Sagliano & Greenfield 1998). This paper will provide a brief overview of the development of content-based ESL courses in the School of International Business at the University of South Australia, and suggest ways that similar courses could be established in other institutions.

Keywords: *ESL, content-based teaching, collaboration, integrated language and academic skills.*

Introduction

The majority of universities in Australia provide academic support to their Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students in the form of an on-campus centre, where students attend sessions or have individual consultations with "Learning Advisers" in their own time.

Evolving from the "Language Across the Curriculum" and the "Language for Specific Purposes" movements, which both began in the 1970s (Brinton, Snow & Wesche 1989, p. 5), content-based language teaching has come to be regarded by many practitioners as an alternative strategy to deal with NESB language and learning issues.

In 1997 a new, elective course was piloted in the Division of Business and Enterprise at the University of South Australia, to provide language and academic support to 21 Malaysian students from the Sepang Institute of Technology. "Business Communication Skills for NESB students" (BCS), used the content-based model of ESL teaching (Brinton, Snow & Wesche 1989), and incorporated three core subject areas of the business degree - accounting, law and economics. Content specialists introduced each module, attended one or more tutorials as required, and double-marked the assignments with the BCS lecturer.

This subject, worth 4.5 credit points, ran in the second semester, and eventually became open to other NESB students from a diverse range of countries. By second semester 2000 there were over 100 students, from 13 different countries.

Until this time, BCS had been coordinated and taught by an hourly paid Learning and Academic Skills (LAS) lecturer from outside the University of SA. Unlike other courses in the Division of Business and Enterprise, BCS did not belong to a specific "school" (department). Every year, in the second semester, the BCS lecturer would have to set up an office, make contact with the appropriate content specialists, and begin the task of organising the course for the coming semester.

Given the politics and conditions of hourly paid work, it is not surprising that by 2000 there had been three different lecturers teaching the subject. Santina Bertone says that this type of teaching situation is the result of the "casualisation of the ESL

workforce", and that there are negative implications for teaching standards and professional development (2000, p. 30).

With these issues in mind and the increased enrolment in BCS, the Dean of Teaching and Learning made a recommendation to the Division that the subject be given a "home" in the School of International Business, and that a lecturer be employed on a permanent basis. By housing the course in the School, Business Communication for NESB students has had the opportunity to build on the foundation, already established, to provide quality, integrated academic and language skills to the University's international students.

Business Communication Skills (NESB) in 2001

The development of collaborative relationships

A key element in developing a course that integrates content with ESL methodology is the collaborative relationship between content specialist and ESL practitioner (Benesch 1988; Guyer & Peterson 1988; Cargill 1996; Pantelides 1999; Sagliano & Greenfield 1998).

Most ESL educators agree that content-based ESL is highly beneficial to students, and a very practical way to overcome the deficiencies of relying solely on IELTS results to ascertain students' readiness to begin academic study (Brinton, Snow & Wesche 1989; Iancu 1993; Grabe & Stoller 1997). However, most would also agree that developing a truly collaborative relationship with specialist lecturers requires commitment from both parties to the content-based model (Snow & Brinton 1984; Benesch 1992; Babbitt & Mlynarczyk 2000). This is not always easy.

To begin with, the ESL educator needs to spend time with the content specialist, explaining the need for, and the multiple benefits of the model. In the case of BCS, hourly paid staff, working on the fringes of the Division's activities, rarely had the opportunity to develop collegial relationships with those whose expertise was vital to the success of the subject. Sarah Benesch suggests that unless both lecturers enjoy a collegial relationship as "equal partners", then the language specialist will be treated (and feel like) a "second class citizen" (1992, p. 4).

A number of researchers (Spiller 1992; Pantelides 1999) have suggested that this type of collaboration is made difficult by current university infrastructures which typically house LAS lecturers in a separate facility to academic faculties, usually with other "counselling" services. Dorothy Spiller mentions two disadvantages to such an arrangement:

> Learning assistance tutors may misjudge the context in which students are being required to learn and write, and there is always the possibility that distance and separation will distort our vision of mainstream academia....[Learning assistance tutors'] separation from the academic mainstream, and perhaps the original proximity to counselling services, leads some students to have negative ideas about learning assistance...(1992, p. 147)

By placing BCS within the School of International Business, and giving the BCS lecturer the appropriate academic status, the subject quickly gained acceptance within the School. For the first time, BCS staff were approached by lecturers wanting to know how their own content area could be incorporated into the curriculum of BCS

Developing a curriculum based on students' needs

Prior to 2001, BCS was taught only in second semester, and often by a newly recruited lecturer. This model provided little opportunity for the BCS lecturer to build on the lessons of the previous semester. In addition, because the subject was not part of a school, there were no formal mechanisms for evaluation.

In the first semester of 2001 Business Communications Skills (NESB) was coordinated and taught by the same lecturer from the previous semester. This lecturer had conducted informal student evaluations in 2000 and was now able to incorporate some of the feedback into the curriculum. In response to students' requests, the content modules now focussed on jobsearch, marketing and accounting.

Another advantage of rewriting some of the curriculum was the opportunity to invite new members of staff to be involved. After three years of providing input (with little or no formal recognition of their efforts), some of the content specialists had expressed reluctance to continue being involved. Again, being a recognised member of the academic staff of the School of International Business meant that approaching and recruiting new content lecturers was relatively easy.

Other advantages of in-faculty ESL programs

As a full-time academic with the same workload commitments as other staff members, time has now been allocated for regular student consultations. Previously, students had to rely on irregular email communication and catching the lecturer at the end of lectures and tutorials.

Being "in-school" has also resulted in communication with other staff members, not necessarily involved in the course, regarding "at risk" students. BCS staff, informed of particular students' learning difficulties, can now incorporate specific strategies and classroom exercises to address those concerns.

Taking the Business Communication Skills model to other schools

The BCS model has recently been adapted for NESB students enrolled in the MBA program. Using the same design of content-based ESL, although following the 11 week MBA term, rather than the 13 week semester, Integrated Business Communication for NESB Postgraduates (IBC) includes three modules from a core MBA subject, "Management Foundations" – Dialogue, Business Economics and Research Methods in Business.

Like its undergraduate counterpart, each module in IBC is assessed with a specific written document (reflective journal, essay and report) and three corresponding oral presentations. Content specialists – lecturers from Management Foundations – give a three-hour introductory lecture to each module, and the IBC lecturer provides between 9-12 hours of integrated language and academic skills workshops, to work towards the specific assessment task. The postgraduates of the IBC also have the

benefit of a half-time tutor for further assistance outside classes and one-to-one consultation.

As a result of the content-based models developed for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, a new course has recently been established for NESB Master of Property students.

Taking the Business Communication Skills model off-shore

The University of South Australia has a total of 5,600 international students, with 4,200 enrolled in offshore programs in Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, China and Indonesia. Significantly, the Division of Business and Enterprise is responsible for nearly 60% of the University's international students and over 76% of the University's offshore students (University of South Australia 2001). Clearly, the Division of BUE has a responsibility to meet the language and academic needs of this significant student population.

Recently, a team-teaching approach, using an adjunct content-based model (Snow & Brinton 1988 & 1997) has been piloted for the subject "Communication for Information Managers" (CIM) in Hong Kong. Although the teaching and learning environment in Hong Kong is vastly different to that of Adelaide, NESB students studying in both countries have a number of fundamental things in common, including:

- Often inadequate or barely adequate English language proficiency for university study;

- A lack of understanding of academic conventions (such as referencing);

- A tendency to plagiarise in assessment tasks, largely because of the two factors above;

- An expectation by some students that because of the huge expense involved in studying at the University of South Australia, students can expect to be given "special consideration" (in terms of grading and overall results); and

- A cultural and linguistic background that may not have fostered the development of critical thinking.

With these similarities in mind, the BCS lecturer worked closely with the CIM lecturer throughout the first semester to adapt the curriculum, and then both lecturers delivered the course, using adjoining lecture theatres and complementary materials.

With only one visit completed, and no assessment tasks submitted, it is difficult to predict whether the new team-teaching approach has had a positive affect on students' learning. However, anecdotal evidence would suggest that students enjoyed and felt that they benefited a great deal from the new approach.

Developing similar courses in other tertiary institutions

Content-based ESL may not be appropriate for all universities. However, for those institutions wishing to integrate ESL in the curriculum and faculty, a number of prerequisites need to be established. These include:

- recognition from management of the particular needs of NESB tertiary students;

- acknowledgement from management and faculty that a minimum IELTS score is barely adequate for successful academic study (Pantelides 1999; Wajnryb 2000);

- acceptance of language specialists as qualified academics, rather than academic support staff;

- the housing of a language specialist in the faculty so that meaningful collegial relationships can be developed (Pantelides 1999);

- approval from management for additional workload points to be allocated for developing content-based courses, in recognition of the "double-load" such courses entail, both in curriculum development and assessment (Snow & Brinton 1988);

- commitment at all levels to being responsible for providing meaningful assistance to fee paying International students (Pantelides 1999).

Conclusion

The University of South Australia has made a commitment to developing appropriate models of language and academic support for the high proportion of International students studying in the Division of Business and Enterprise, both in Australia and in the offshore programs.

After the successful pilot and ongoing development of the content-based ESL course, "Business Communication Skills for NESB students", a permanent position has been created for a full-time lecturer to work in the School of International Business. In making this position part of the faculty, rather than employing LAS lecturers on a semester-by-semester basis, significant progress has been made towards expanding and delivering other integrated ESL courses for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In addition to providing an alternative strategy to the traditional model of occasional, not-for-credit assistance offered by a student support centre, this arrangement has been instrumental in changing the way other academic staff view language and academic support.

It is the contention of this paper that integrated, content-based ESL courses, taught by appropriately qualified language specialists, working within faculties, is a highly effective model that has been advocated by many ESL practitioners for over 15 years.

As Sarah Benesch so eloquently argues:

> Rather than remaining isolated from the academic mainstream or acting as a tutoring service, [LAS lecturers] can bring a critical and informed perspective to [university] teaching practices by collaborating as equal partners with other faculty members. (Benesch 1992, p. 8)

The next stage in this project will be the development and implementation of a clear program of evaluation to verify the anecdotal evidence on which this paper is based.

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* Of the 40 universities in Australia, Central Queensland University, The University of Sydney, Griffith University, Adelaide University, The University of Melbourne and The University of NSW are known to offer content-based ESL courses for credit. These courses are usually facilitated or taught by LAS lecturers working outside faculties.

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