

The Necessity of, yet Cautionary Points of Using a Hybrid Curriculum in an ESL/EFL Classroom

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Abstract:- It has become increasingly beneficial, if not necessary, in today's contemporary ESL/EFL classroom to use what many teacher researchers refer to as a Hybrid Curriculum, otherwise known as a Content Based Language Curriculum. Doing so reflects the needs of an increasing number of students wishing to study abroad in discourse communities that may not communicate literally, verbally, socially, and so on in the first language of the matriculating student from abroad. This presents challenges to both students and professors alike that must be addressed if students studying abroad in a language other than their first language are to have any chance of navigating successfully their chosen field of study. A hybrid curriculum has therefore been proposed as a means of preparing prospective study abroad students for the rigors of academia abroad, as it not only prepares ESL/EFL students for the nomenclature their sure to experience in undergraduate studies abroad, but also clearly for the academic reading, writing, speaking, listening and grammar skills they will be required to communicate their thoughts, opinions, research ideas in. A discretionary point must be made however to teachers considering such a curriculum. That being the use of content specific to a discipline with less than adequate attention being made to discrete skills instruction as well.

I. INTRODUCTION

This research paper begins with a discretionary point, which I believe, made clear by both Johns (1988), and Turner (2004) underscores the need for ESL curriculum that is discrete skills, and content integrated. The discretionary point being the risk inherent in teaching our ESL or EFL students content related to a discipline with disregard for discrete skills instruction. As even though by doing so ESL practitioners hope to give students a leg-up in their mainstream, or content courses by making them more conversant writers and thinkers in a chosen field of study or discourse community, there is a possibility students will not be developing the discrete skills they need to interpret and convey through discourse, or writing, their findings, or opinions related to content the teacher or teachers inevitably demand they use to do so (Turner 2004). Discrete skills instruction is isolated from content as it exists for language students after their IEP or EAP program, in content courses didactically structured to meet the professional, linguistic and cultural expectations of native speaking students, far removed from discrete skills instruction and practice (Harklau 1994). Content perhaps previously thought to be irrelevant to language instructors teaching a curriculum primarily devoted to discrete skills

instruction, becomes abundantly necessary, as integrated or graduated ESL students, who though able to construct literary forms at least to freshman level undergraduate expectations, are poor thinkers and orators by Western educational standards, devoid of knowledge related to the abilities and thought processes of NSS (native speaking students) (Harklau 1994). That is to say, that NNS (non-native speakers), some entering a Western academy for the first time, little exposed to texts, oratory, rules, social norms, and so on as they exist for NSS, in NS contexts, may feel, or seem, less prepared for the Western academic classroom than they really are (Flowerdew & Peacock 2001). Western born educators in secondary or post-secondary education untrained in language arts, or unwilling to indulge international students' 'apparent' lack of social, cultural, cognitive, or disciplinary aptitude, may also wonder why the IEP, EAP, or ESL program isn't doing more to prepare them (Harklau 1994; Fox 1994).

To prevent the under, or overuse of either practice, it is proposed by Stoller (1999); Flowerdew & Peacock (2001) Palinkas, Tortorella, & Flaitz, (2002), and Song (2006), that content and discrete skills be integrated in equal measure in curricular approaches that are innovative, and prepare students for the content-learning demands of mainstream courses without ignoring language skills (Flowerdew & Peacock 2001; Brinton et al., 1992), teach acculturation and socialization (Fox 1994; Stoller 1999), and teach the rules of discourse and academic style (Jordan 1997). In other words, a curriculum that represents a dynamic system of interrelated elements, that is conducive to academic growth, as it will be experienced after or during the IEP or EAP program, through the use of academic content and language. (See Appendix A for a table showing the difference between discrete skills instruction and content-integrated/skills-based instruction).

One such curriculum is a Hybrid Curriculum, Stoller (1999), also known as Content Based Language Instruction, (Palinkas et al., 2002). So called, as it teaches exclusively to neither content nor discrete skills, yet aspires to improve both through the use of a core class, which "is designed to simulate the demands of regular courses and to offer systematic and scaffolded language-and content-learning support" (Flowerdew & Peacock 2001, p. 217), thematic units that accompany and support the core class, and discrete skills that are developed through a convergence of the core class and the thematic units (Stoller 1999; Flowerdew & Peacock 2001). See Appendix B. I shall refer to the curriculum speaking to the aforementioned integration of language skills and content, to borrow from Stoller (1999), and Flowerdew and Peacock, (2001), as a

“Hybrid Curriculum”, out of the need to further develop only one notion of this type of curriculum.

Prior to the notion of a hybrid curriculum, ESL practitioners were largely using Thematic, Sheltered, and Adjunct approaches to develop curricular models it was believed, would most closely mirror in content, culture, formal academic style, and language, what ESL students were, or would be experiencing in their academic courses (Brinton et al., 1992; Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998; Flowerdew & Peacock 2001). Furthermore, that using these approaches and the authentic, relevant material they embody, students would develop the lexical, and syntactic elements needed for good writing, speaking, listening, and reading skills, through exploration of content (Flowerdew & Peacock 2001). That is, that through the use of content and the cognitive struggle that ensues to interpret, synthesize, and use it, students would develop, in addition to applicable culture, formal academic style, and language, proper syntax and lexical items. Though research (Stoller 1997, 1999; Brinton et al., 1992; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998) indicates the Thematic, Sheltered, and Adjunct approaches were, and continue to be successful, a fear among ESL practitioners and researchers crept in that suggested to strong a focus on content and the language learning elements it supposes, could lead to neglect of discrete skills instruction and the success for good academic writing and speaking that it infers (Johns 1988; Spack 1988; Boshier 1992; Leki & Carson 1997).

The Hybrid Curriculum proposed by this author, resembles the hybrid curriculum introduced by Fredricka Stoller in her 1999 article, “Time for Change: A Hybrid Curriculum for EAP Programs.” Though this model assumes 6 thematic units, a Core Content-Based Course, and 6 skills for development through the convergence of the Core class, and the thematic units, the model I propose consists of 3 thematic units, with a Core class, and 5 skills for development. **See Appendix C.** The reasoning for this is that Stoller’s model presupposes a curricular wide commitment, with an existing ESL, IEP, or EAP program’s curriculum, and faculty all focused on the thematic units, core class, and skills of the model. In addition, the model calls for 26 hours of ESL instruction per week. Without access to such a program that can be modified to meet the presuppositions of Stoller’s model, this author is limited by the constraints of what is available. My model assumes a business theme, as previously interviewed students at Nihon University and Tokai University, expressed a strong interest in this theme. Of the 25 students that were either interviewed, or that responded to my questionnaire, 40% said that they were planning to, or were interested in studying business abroad, and 40% expressed an interest in a model that seemed dedicated to the development of academic writing, speaking, study skills, listening, and reading that was business orientated. Business furthermore, is a popular subject among expectant, enrolled, or soon to be graduating ESL students, as noted by (Evers 2007), when she writes with regards to international students entering Carleton University, Ottawa, that “Many of the international students come to Carleton University with the

expectation of completing a degree in International Business, Business, or Economics” (Evers, A. 2007, p. 1). Peter Master and Donna M. Brinton, editors of the book “New Ways in English for Specific Purposes”, published in 1998, wrote that EBE, or English for business and economics, was “The fastest growing form of English for Specific Purposes” (Master & Brinton 1998, p. 145). With regards to expectant teachers of English as a Second Language, Dr. Thomas Kane of Worldwide Teachers, Guadalajara Mexico, comments in his article, “Communication for the Global Executive”, from *American Language Review*, 2001,

Teaching Business English can be a lucrative option for the savvy ESL teacher. In this new millennium, we view the global economy as filled with promise, and fraught with peril. Executives who are participating in and leading global change need specialized English language courses. They need instruction in confronting and erasing some of their biggest challenges when using English as the language of presentation, information and competitive debate. (p. 166)

Professor Rajshekhar (Raj) G. Javalgi, Professor of Marketing and International Business, Cleveland State University writes that international students studying business on college campuses all across America, “appears to be rising exponentially” (p. 32).

II. IMPLICATIONS

Content/discrete skills integrated courses undoubtedly have the potential to help enrolled or matriculating ESL students’ transition from an IEP or EAP program to undergraduate level academic courses much easier than would otherwise be expected. As we have seen, they serve the purpose of not only serving the reading, writing, speaking/listening, grammar skills afforded in discrete skills instruction, but also provide acclimatization to the content community through acculturation, socialization, task based rather than form focused, or functional instruction, exposure to relevant rhetorical conventions, and formal academic style. Content/discrete skills integrated courses also imply different approaches to curriculum design, materials development, staff development, and program administration (Brinton et al., 1992).

The Hybrid Curriculum lends itself easily to a content/discrete skills integrated approach, in that by its design, which is somewhat similar to the Theme-based approach, different topics can be explored, while concurrently, through the convergence of a core class and thematic units, discrete skills are also developed. The Hybrid model may also be found useful in institutions where there are no content course offerings, such as may be required when using a Sheltered or Adjunct approach. Examples might include adult schools or language institutes. Content for this type of curriculum can be provided and supported entirely by one or two ESL instructors working full time, or as adjuncts, from within a pre-existing IEP or EAP program. Making it even more attractive is the fact

that it holds the potential to involve minimal changes in an already existing institutional structure.

Drawbacks might include, if the Hybrid curriculum I am proposing is to be taught to one content area, and that area is for example business, that the content instructor(s) ultimately should have some knowledge of the content area under instruction (Dudley-Evans & St. John 1998). This may inevitably involve the ESL teacher(s) putting in a lot of additional hours to get to know, and thereby properly scaffold and teach the content. Thematic units must be authentic, for example magazines, newspapers, video, and television, and adapted for language teaching purposes. The use of such materials, should they not already be adapted for language teaching, must be adapted for use by the ESL instructor, and strongly linked to the core class so as to properly exploit the language/content link, involving more time and effort. Having a content area specialist co-teaching with an ESL instructor properly invested in the idea would be ideal. This also however involves additional staffing, which leads to further commitment of funds and resources (Harklau 1994). Also, the content area specialist would need to be sensitized to the needs and abilities of second language learners. Another potential drawback may be the level, and homogenous nature of the curriculum.

III. CONCLUSION

The field of ESL instruction has seen big changes over the last 3 decades. None perhaps bigger, more controversial, or more influential in ESL pedagogy however than content instruction, and its use in discrete skills instruction to authenticate, justify, and replicate content as it may be

experienced by students during or post ESL instruction. In light of such progress, it goes without saying that all due attention should be made to integrate content into discrete skills instruction subjugating any outdated notions of a strictly discrete skills curriculum. My research has shown that such pedagogy minimalizes students' chances of fully integrating and communicating in the discourse community of the academy.

As ESL students play their part through ESL instruction to meet the expectations of university professors and the academies they teach for, we must do our part as either researchers or instructors, to see to it that they are provided through whatever means are at our disposal, the most contemporary, pedagogically effective methods to help ensure their academic success. They are sure to face issues far more challenging as enrolled or matriculating undergraduate students than merely knowing how to read, write, speak, listen and use good grammar in academic ways. They will face issues related to culture, discourse, socialization, gender, academic style, etc., that will surely confound any ideas they have of academic success based solely on discrete skills. Using an integrated content/discrete skills curriculum, and more specifically, a Hybrid curriculum that combines a content-based course with support courses that reinforce skills instruction, is surely one very effective way of helping them meet both ends of our Western style university expectations.

➤ *Appendix A.*

Differences Between a Discrete-Skills and Content-Integrated/Skills-based Curriculum (Borrowed from Dantas-Whitney, M. & Dimmitt, N. 2002)

Discrete Skills	Content-Integrated/Skills-Based
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate classes are devoted to the development of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills are combined in every class
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The content of classes has lower priority than the skills which are targeted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course content is the vehicle through which language skills are integrated and taught
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topics of study are often unrelated to each other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topics in every class are unified under one theme

Table 1

➤ Appendix B

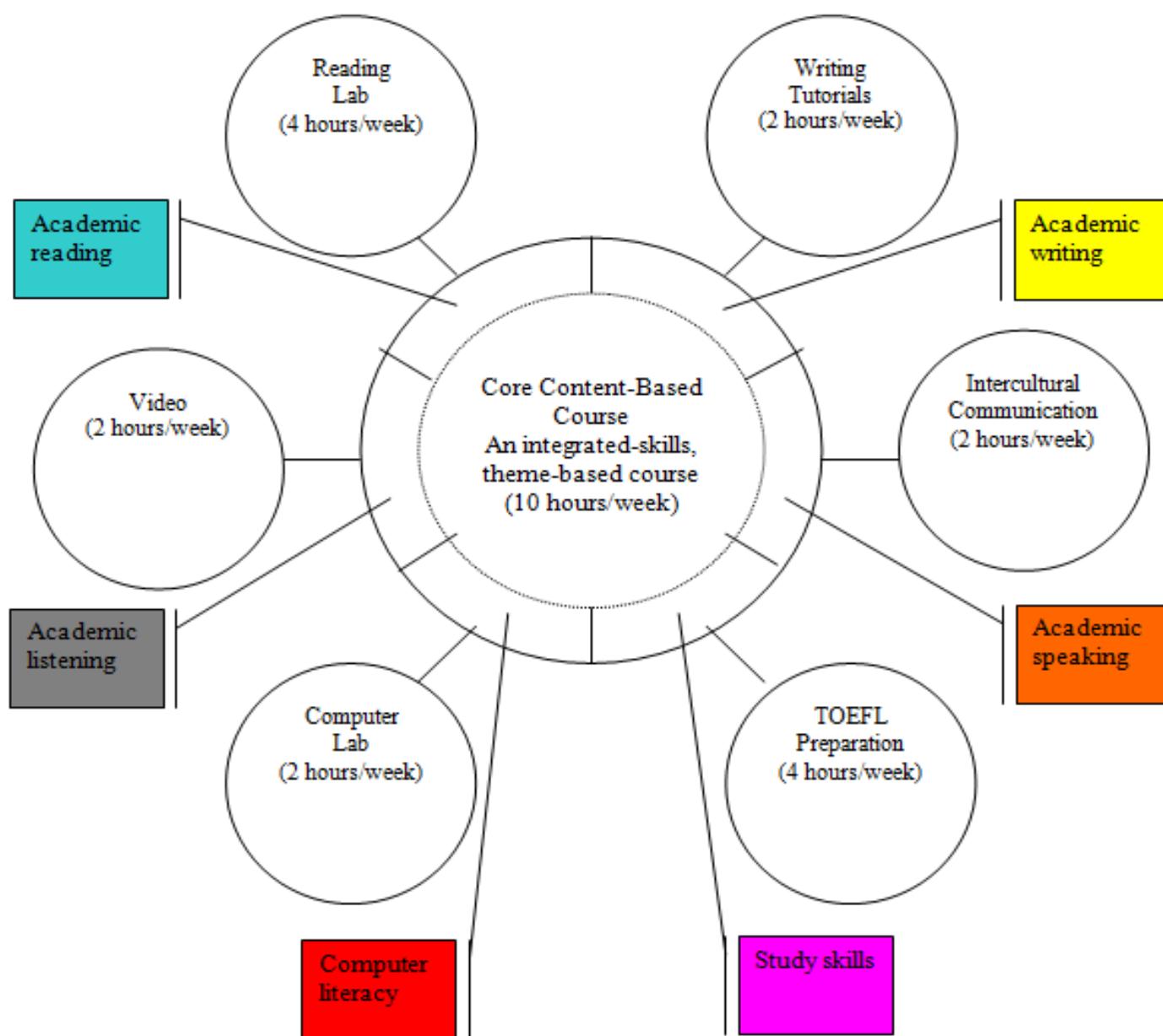


Fig 1

➤ Appendix C

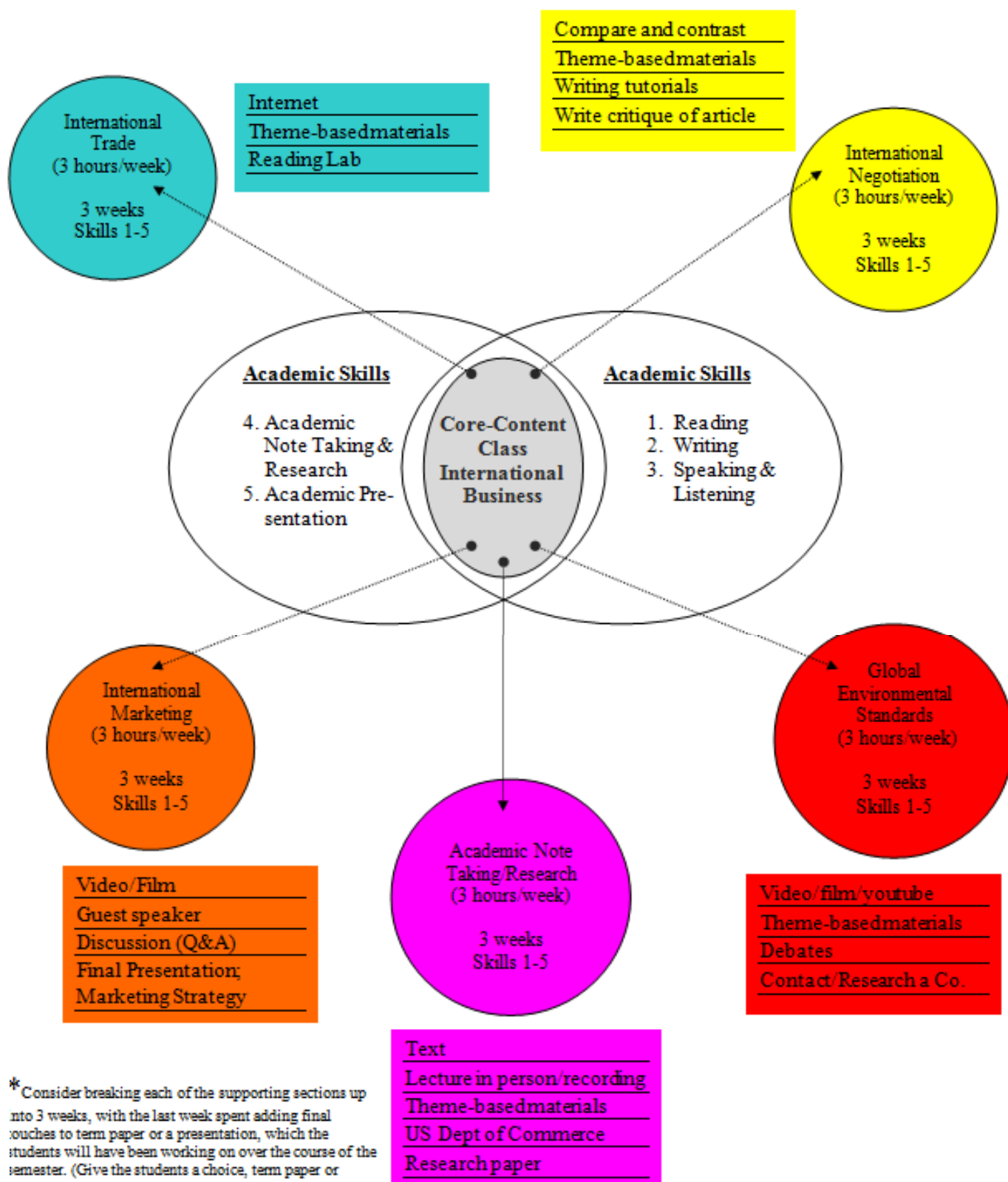


Fig 2

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