

# **Designing the Sophomore English Curriculum**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2002, the Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University was asked to instruct a new required English course for 2<sup>nd</sup> year International Relations majors starting in 2005. The International Relations (IR) Department asked that CELE not only instruct but also design the course to support a required 2<sup>nd</sup> year seminar. The main concern of the International Relations department was that the present students were unable to read and understand concepts related to their field in English. Seeing that English is one of the lingua-francas of the field, students' low English language skills directly affect their studies. As a result, the IR Department requested a course that focused on vocabulary building, academic reading and writing using topics specific to the area of International Relations. With these criteria in mind, the Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) took on the task of developing the curriculum.

The CDC started in 2002 with scheduling and leveling. The following decisions were made: 1) The course is to be taught in one 90-minute koma the first semester with a 45-minute class to be added in the second. And 2) Like Freshman English, students will be leveled according to their English language proficiency into 14 levels. With these tasks completed, the next process was to develop the curriculum.

In 2003, the CDC started preparing for the course by narrowing the focus and purchasing materials. In order to do this, many meetings were held between the CDC Chair and the liaison for the IR department. The meetings resulted in a list of topics that reflected the interests of the students, the specialties of the IR professors, and the courses offered at AU. Topics included but were not limited to: United Nations, NGOs, Human Rights, and Asian issues. Once these were decided, the search for materials began and is ongoing.

Curriculum development did not begin until 2004. Many of this year's CDC members have never taught nor developed curriculum for content-based courses but were given the task of creating an effective curriculum that meets the needs of the students and addresses the needs of the school. In order to do this the following two issues needed to be addressed: a working definition of content-based curriculum and the recognition of the challenges of developing the curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these issues and how the authors applied them to curriculum development at CELE.

## **DEFINING A CONTENT-BASED CURRICULUM**

Agreeing on a working definition of content-based courses is a main step in creating an effective curriculum that meets the needs of the students, the university and the teachers. There are varying definitions to assist in the process of such curriculum development. The questions that need to be answered are: Is it a content-driven course where learning the content is the priority? Is it a language-driven course where language-learning tasks take precedence? Or is it somewhere in between? Every university and program will have their own unique needs and educational goals that must be met.

Table1: Continuum of Content and Language Integration

<p><b>Content-Driven</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content is taught in L2.</li> <li>• Content learning is priority.</li> <li>• Language learning is secondary.</li> <li>• Content objectives determined by course goals or curriculum.</li> <li>• Teachers must select language objectives.</li> <li>• Students evaluated on content mastery.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Language-Driven</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content is used to learn L2.</li> <li>• Language learning is priority.</li> <li>• Content learning is incidental.</li> <li>• Language objectives determined by L2 course goals or curriculum.</li> <li>• Students evaluated on content to be integrated.</li> <li>• Students evaluated on language skills/ proficiency.</li> </ul>
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Source: Met, M. (1999)

According to this Table by Met, there is a continuum that integrates language- and content-based courses. It is by analyzing the continuum and then applying it to individual program needs that curriculum developers can meet the goals specific to their content.

At one end of the continuum are content-driven programs, where student learning of the content is the main focus of the course and language learning is secondary. It is the content that determines the instruction and mastery of the content, which is the primary goal. Programs that focus mainly on the content are those such as immersion programs where the focus of instruction is on the content while learning it in another language. In these programs, little attention is paid to language instruction. Language emerges from the content and contact with the teacher and other students. Thus, at this end of the continuum, students' mastery of the content is primary and language learning is incidental.

At the other end of the continuum, there are language-driven courses where content becomes a tool for achieving the language learning curriculum. The student is not held accountable for learning the content but rather for learning the language. In this case, foreign language courses reinforce language acquisition. Programs that are language-driven but use content as a means to teach language, select content based on its usefulness in furthering the language goals. Language learning is primary and content learning is secondary. However, for most programs, curriculum development and instruction are between these two extremes.



Other varying views on the definitions of “content” and “content-based instruction” exist. However, in essence, content-based instruction is an integration of both language and content as the extent to which content or language is emphasized will greatly influence how the curriculum is taught and what will be included in it. For the purpose of curriculum development at Asia University, a combination of sheltered and adjunct approaches were found to be the most appropriate for the program while integrating topical-based units.

## THE CHALLENGES

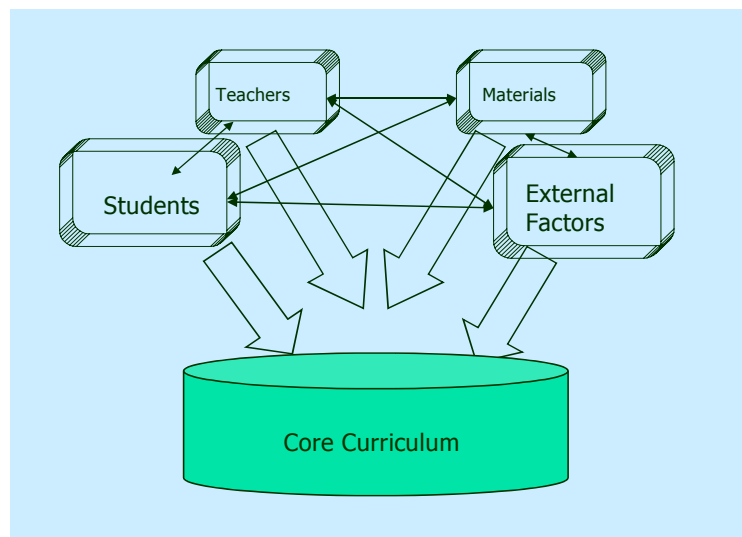
As mentioned in the introduction, CELE was asked to design and instruct a required content-based course for 2<sup>nd</sup> year International Relation majors starting in 2005. While developing the curriculum, the teachers faced many challenges from inside and outside the Department. In order to develop an effective curriculum that met the needs of all, these challenges had to be recognized and addressed. When considering the challenges for this course, the following factors were taken into account:

- 1) This is to be a required course for all International Relations majors in their second year;
- 2) The majority of the students will have just returned from a 5-month intensive English study abroad program in the United States;
- 3) The students need to learn similar topics, vocabulary, and ideas;
- 4) This is a program that is to support a required Sophomore International Relations seminar that will be taken simultaneously.

It is important to note that in the seminar structure at Asia University, students are free to choose from a variety of seminar topics within the field of International Relations. However, there are no 2<sup>nd</sup> year courses, which focus on the basics of International Relations. Once these factors were accounted for, the challenges were addressed.

The authors identified four areas that presented challenges in developing the curriculum for the International Relations content course. As seen in Diagram 1 below (Brooks, 2004), these factors included issues related to teachers, materials and students as well as various external factors.

Diagram 1: Challenges of Developing a Content-based Course



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Challenges related to students reflect program expectations, student needs, and teacher concerns. These challenges include: students of varying English language proficiencies, students' prior knowledge in the content area and class size.

Since this is a program and it is required of all second year International Relations majors, one of the first challenges is the varying English language proficiencies of the students. However, this is also one of the easiest challenges to remedy because the program allows for streaming students and placing them into classes according to their English abilities. Prior content knowledge is also a challenge. The teachers have to work with students who may or may not have a solid foundation in International Relations in their first language let alone their second language. Another factor related to students content knowledge is what they were taught in their study abroad programs. There are three different sites at three different universities with different curriculums in the content-based courses. The challenge of class size is also an issue. If the classes are too large in student number, the students may feel that they are not learning. Finally, students' interest and motivation to take a content-based course also needs to be taken into account.

Finding materials for content-based courses presents another set of challenges. The lack of language-appropriate textbooks and materials related to the content is the main challenge. The majority of the materials that content-based curriculums need are neither marketed nor published in Japan. The materials in Japan are geared specifically towards theme-based language instruction and most publishers do not have access to the materials that are needed for content-based courses. Many publishers, who are marketing strictly EFL materials for Japan and Asia, are not defining content-based materials in the same way that the authors do. Publishers defined content-based in the terms of theme-based while the authors were defining it as sheltered and adjunct.

The challenges that curriculum developers have to acknowledge in teaching are the varying teaching styles of instructors, their prior knowledge of the content, and the ability to teach in or utilize the students' native language. Since teachers come from varying educational backgrounds and different experiences, their teaching styles differ greatly. Thus, curriculum developers need to allow for different styles and not force one style onto everyone.

As mentioned before, the majority of the Native English teachers in Japan are EFL specialists and may not have any prior knowledge of the content to be taught. They may be intimidated by teaching a content-based course if they are unfamiliar with the content. However, if it is approached as, "language instruction that integrates the presentation of topics or tasks from subject matter courses (e.g., Math, social studies) within the context of teaching a second or foreign language" as defined by Crandall and Tucker (1990), then having instruction done by EFL teachers is an appropriate choice. Finally, many teachers feel that they need to be able to instruct in the native language of the students. It is the learning of content through English that takes precedence, which means that instruction should be in the target language with little or no native language support.

The fourth and final area is external factors such as the goals of the university and the specific department that the content relates to, the organization of students, scheduling and funding. Since these external factors are outside of the curriculum developers' direct control, concessions and negotiation with those responsible for these areas at the university need to be made.

## SUMMARY

CELE has been in the process of developing Sophomore English for the past three years. This will be the first official program wide content-based course to be taught by CELE. In order to develop an effective content-based curriculum, it was necessary to identify where on the continuum their course belongs. The Sophomore English program has its own unique needs and finding the definition that best fit the program will allow teachers to meet the needs of students and administration. Along with finding a workable definition, CELE also needed to identify the challenges that would effect curriculum development. Some of these challenges may be universal throughout programs at different universities such as: student language proficiency, finding appropriate materials and prior content knowledge of teachers. While other challenges may be unique to the CELE program. Thus, by defining content-based curriculum specifically for the program needs, and considering the challenges within their own program context, CELE can then develop an effective curriculum.

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