

Integrating Subject-matters for a Well-Balanced EFL Instruction at University Level

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ABSTRACT

There is an undeniable agreement among researchers and methodologists that competence in a foreign language essentially means competence in both form and content; that is, linguistic competence and cultural competence. However, at university level, and specifically in the English department in Blida University, 'form' and 'content' subject-matters are taught separately; as a result, the students do not perceive any logical link between them. These learners end up their formal instruction with unsatisfactory achievement at all levels. This paper tries, then, to suggest an integration of the subject-matters within a content-based approach to EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching/learning to cater for learners' needs. For such an aim, the writing skill, as a subject-matter, is taken as an example through which the language 'form' could be taught and further advanced when combined with language 'content' subject-matters _ namely, literature and civilization_ , within 'content-based instruction', 'writing across the curriculum' and 'genre pedagogy' approaches. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to propose an instructional framework based on the integration of the language skills and culture subject-matters for a well-balanced EFL university formation.

Key words: writing, learner needs, content-based instruction, integration of the subject-matters

RESUME

Il y'a un accord incontestable entre les chercheurs et méthodologues que la compétence dans une langue étrangère est essentiellement la compétence linguistique (la forme) et la compétence culturelle (le contenu). Cependant, au niveau universitaire, les matières concernant l'apprentissage de la forme de la langue et celles concernant le contenu sont enseignées séparément; par conséquent, les étudiants ne perçoivent aucun lien logique entre les différentes matières. Ces apprenants finissent leur formation avec un échec dans les deux genres de matières. Cet article tente donc de proposer une intégration des matières dans une approche basée sur le contenu pour répondre aux besoins des apprenants. Pour un tel objectif, l'expression écrite est considérée comme un exemple des matières à travers lequel l'intégration pourrait être effectuée. Le présent article est une tentative de suggérer un cadre pédagogique fondé sur

l'intégration des matières dans le but d'atteindre une formation universitaire de l'anglais plus équilibrée.

Mots clés: l'expression écrite, les besoins des apprenants, l'enseignement basé sur le contenu, l'intégration des matières

INTRODUCTION .1

As a result of the globalization process, foreign language teaching, particularly EFL, is gaining more and more importance in Algeria, notably in higher education. Accordingly, policy makers and researchers strive hard to improve EFL teaching/learning to meet the nationwide and worldwide challenges, and produce competent EFL learners with an intercultural perspective. There is an undeniable agreement among these researchers and methodologists that competence in a foreign language essentially means competence in both form and content; that is, linguistic competence and cultural competence. Culture is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning. Therefore, the EFL syllabus comprises language system subject-matters such as those concerning the teaching of the four skills, in addition to content subject-matters concerning the teaching of culture through –principally, civilization and literature. Despite this agreement over ‘what –to-teach’, there seems to be no agreement over ‘how-to-teach’. The fact is that, at university level, the subjects are taught separately like disconnected ‘islands’. This disconnection has negative effects on students’ achievement in both language aspects; furthermore, it prevents them from gaining an intercultural perspective through EFL learning.

This paper attempts to suggest an integration of the subject-matters within a content-based approach to EFL teaching/learning. For such an aim, and because of its big importance for students during and after university formation, writing is chosen as an example of the skills through which a content-based instruction could be implemented and further improved within ‘writing across the curriculum’ and ‘genre’ approaches. Thus, in order to cater for learner needs and achieve the desired educational objectives, this paper attempts to provide room for the following issues:

Unveil the difficulties and weaknesses perceived in EFL teaching and learning caused by wrong practices -1

Consider the Algerian EFL learners’ needs -2

Suggest an instructional framework to teach writing drawing from other subject-matters, such as literature and civilization -3

Explain the benefits such an instruction would have for both teachers and learners -4

Foresee challenges and thus identify conditions for its success -5

This article is based on personal experience and related specialized literature. The main belief guiding this work is that foreign language learning is

comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, as well as cultural competence.

EFL in the English department, Blida University .2

The aim of this part is to unveil the difficulties and weaknesses perceived in EFL teaching and learning caused by wrong practices, and the impact of such weaknesses on learners' achievement.

Administrative and Pedagogical Considerations .2.1

English is a second foreign language in Algeria (the first one being French).

English is granted considerable importance due to its increasing importance for carrying out advanced studies, for job career prospects and for national economic development. Therefore, the English department strives to produce competent teachers, workers and citizens.

The students in the department of English are baccalaureate holders who have had a 7 years experience in studying EFL before enrolling in the department. The studies at the university are divided into three levels –according to LMD (Licence – Master - Doctorat) laws. The first level is to be completed in three years, at the end of which the students get a Licence degree (equivalent to a BA degree). The second level is to be completed in two years, and the successful students get a Master degree. The last level is the doctorate level which has to be completed in three years. The curriculum in the department of English consists of four main sections called teaching units. The first section includes fundamental subject-matters; these concern mainly the four language skills, grammar, literature and civilization. The second section concerns the methodology subject-area which attempts to foster learners' study and research strategies. The third is the 'discovery' unit where the students enrich their knowledge of the language by expanding its use to different areas. In the fourth teaching unit, called 'transversal', the students are encouraged to learn other languages such as Arabic, French, Spanish or Italian. They are also given the opportunity to improve their knowledge in other subject-areas, such as computing, in a way to permit them to transfer their acquired credits to other fields of study in the same university or in other universities (in accordance with the ECTS - European Credits Transfer System-). As far as evaluation is concerned, there are two forms which are adopted in each semester: ongoing assessment, in which students' work is evaluated on a regular basis (formative assessment), and end-of-semester exams (summative assessment).

Writing is considered as an important skill since all exams and most of research works and homework assignments are done in the written mode. The writing skill is also a subject-matter on its own; it is also evaluated according to the

previously-stated principles. However, despite a rich curriculum, the level of students enrolled in the department of English is unsatisfactory in all subject-matters, specifically in what concerns their writing competence; a fact that calls for close consideration in order to find appropriate remedies.

Observations: .2.2

While considering EFL teaching/learning at university level, one could make several observations: First, the four skills, mainly speaking and writing, are taught in isolation from content subject-matters. The second remark is that though authentic material may be included in the receptive skills (listening and reading), it is not included in the productive ones (speaking and writing). A third finding is that there is no collaboration between teachers of the different subject-matters. Moreover, in terms of official guidelines, no substantial change has been brought in the 'what to teach' issue, and no new perspectives on 'how to teach' question, despite the LMD reform (introduced in 2007 in Blida English department). LMD curricula faithfully follow the previous ones; as Miliani posits, *'several teachers simply changed the modules' labels of the old subjects, away from the innovative procedure introduced.'* (Miliani, 2005, p.28). Furthermore, there are no institutionalized practices, either for teacher training and development, or for curriculum design or improvement. The result is that most teachers lack professionalism and do not use suitable teaching materials. Learners, for their part, get little feedback from teachers because of the reduced number of hours for each course and because of the large class size.

The impact of the above flaws is felt as impinging on both teachers and learners. To begin with, language skills teachers and cultural content teachers follow different teaching and evaluation norms, as there is no collaborative work. The fact is that they seldom meet to discuss teaching concerns. Students, as a result, perceive no link between 'form' and 'content' subject-matters; furthermore, during exams, they are unable to focus on form and content at the same time. The obvious consequence is that these students display low achievement in both kinds of subject-matters; which most teachers discover during evaluation practices - in exams, final projects, and homework or class assignments. Therefore, there must be a new form of EFL instruction that integrates both kinds of subject-areas. The guiding principles would be to consider learners' needs (Narcy-Combes, 2005), and then devise teaching and evaluation methodologies accordingly.

3. Needs analysis

As a first and compulsory step, we have to know what students' needs are in order to determine learning objectives, and choose appropriate methods of instruction. It is noteworthy that in the present article writing is chosen as an example of language skills (form) subject-matters through which integration of cultural competence (content) subject-matters can be achieved. For that reason,

most of the needs analysis carried out will essentially concern the college level writing skill.

Consulting the literature on writing (Reid, 2001 and Smoke, 2001), on EFL learning/teaching (Hartley, 1998 & Nunan, 1988), and on needs analysis (Hamzaoui, 2006; Morell Moll, 1999; & Stroller, 1997), one can form the following assumptions:

- EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students must be prepared to respond successfully to college and university writing assignments -
- Students need to know how to write different types of texts, with fluency and accuracy, using the required discourse mode and addressing the intended audience. This is necessary to answer subject-area questions. It is not enough to acquire knowledge without having the linguistic means to transmit it in the written mode. -
- In EAP instruction, students have to be exposed to the functions and forms of the writing requirements and assignments they are almost certain to encounter in their future courses. -
- The ability to evaluate students' current needs and analyse target texts is therefore a key feature of a teacher's role and of the training which leads to becoming a writing teacher. -
- The writing course should be designed to integrate student needs with the hierarchy of institutional values, disciplinary and professional expectations. -
- Course design should always begin with what the students know, what they are able to do, and what they are interested in learning to do. -
- [Needs analysis] is the means of establishing the *how* and *what* of a course. -

- On the basis of the above assumptions, one can assume that learners' needs are to develop their linguistic and cultural competence (Kramsch, 1993 & 1998) -
- to have opportunities to write on different topics, in different discourse modes -
 - to be able to write in meaningful and authentic contexts -
 - to become aware of the link between the different subject-matters -
 - to learn study skills and essay writing, using different models of discourse and creative writing -
 - to learn how to present research work in writing -
 - to become successful students, future competent teachers/workers, and strong researchers -

Instructional framework .3

What follows is the description of the theoretical and practical backgrounds of a suggested instructional framework, based on personal experience and related literature. This framework has not yet been put into practice. It is hoped, however, it would attract attention of teachers and administrators to the possibility of providing improvement to the teaching and learning of EFL at the level of the Algerian University.

4. 1. *Description*

A renewed concern has appeared concerning the writing skill because of its importance in teaching and learning. Among the many theories that have emerged, three that have gained wide recognition are **content-based instruction** (henceforth CBI), **writing across the curriculum**, and **genre approach**

According to Brinton, Snow & Wesche (2003), Met (1999), and Sticht (1997)

CBI aims at eliminating the artificial separation between language -

instruction and subject-matter classes

the use of informational content increases motivation in the language -

course and thus promotes more effective learning

language should be taught through a focus on contextualized use rather -

than on fragmented examples of correct sentence level usage

- CBI would help learners develop writing competence in the kind of texts and discourse

they need during their formation and even beyond, as researchers and international communicators

Basically, CBI is valuable since it does not separate language and content.

Moreover, as Grabe & Stoller (1997, pp. 19-20) further explain:

In CBI, students are exposed to a considerable amount of language while -

learning content. This incidental language should be comprehensible,

linked to their immediate prior learning and relevant to their needs.

In CBI classrooms, teachers and students explore interesting content while -

students are engaged in appropriate language dependent activities. The

resultant language learning activities, therefore, are not artificial or meaningless exercises.

CBI supports contextualised learning; students are taught useful language -

that is embedded within relevant discourse contexts rather than as isolated

language fragments. Thus, CBI allows for explicit language instruction,

integrated with content instruction, in a relevant and purposeful context.

CBI lends itself to student-centred classroom activities. -

Similarly, Smoke (in Silva and Matsuda, 2001) claims the pedagogical benefits of content-based instruction as she linked writing with different subject-

matters, exposing as such the advantages of ‘**writing across the curriculum**’ approach:

the joint assignments helped students to see connections between the -
courses and the writing and reading they did
these assignments helped in the acquisition of English and understanding -
of course material and in vocabulary development
students in these linked classes tended to do better in both courses than in -
the unlinked classes

Because of learners’ low achievement in all competencies, educators should understand that writing instruction can no longer be confined to the writing class. If teachers in various culture-oriented subject-matters added writing to their courses, they would discover that writing assignments bring great benefits. Students would not only enhance their general writing ability, but also increase their understanding of content. Teachers, however, may be reluctant to assign writing tasks on a regular basis because of the unpleasant chore of correction in large classes, in which the number of students often exceeds 50! A possible solution for this is to adopt different types of correction so that to alleviate its difficulty. Among these types are self- correction, peer correction, and holistic grading (i.e., evaluating the overall quality of the written work) (Brookes and Grundy, 1990; Elbow, 1994; Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 2006).

But it is necessary for these teachers to work in collaboration with writing teachers to see what kinds of essays students have been taught so that their assignments can function as practice for those types. Similarly, writing teachers have to be in touch with content-based subject-areas teachers in order to be informed of the type of writing –essays/paragraphs- their students need most, and so devise a writing curriculum accordingly. Teachers would apply some principles of genre approach in writing instruction. Hyland (2004, pp. 10-16) maintains that **genre pedagogy** is

Explicit : it makes clear what is to be learnt to facilitate the acquisition of -
writing skills

Systematic : it provides a coherent framework for focusing on both -
language and contexts

Needs-based : it ensures that course objectives and content are derived -
from students’
needs

Supportive : it gives teachers a central role in scaffolding students’ -
learning and creativity

Empowering : it provides access to the patterns and possibilities of -
variation in valued texts

Consciousness-raising : it increases teachers' awareness of texts to -
confidently advise students on writing

To sum up, by making explicit what is to be learnt, providing a coherent framework for studying language and contexts, teachers would ensure that course objectives are derived from and geared towards students' needs.

4.2. Pedagogical Implications

In practical terms, some implications arise from the application of the above mentioned types of instruction:

to advocate an integration of the subject-matters: no subject-matter would -
be taught in a vacuum or in isolation

to raise students' awareness about the link between linguistic competence -
and cultural competence subject-areas

teachers in charge of different subject-matters should meet regularly to -
adjust their teaching programmes accordingly

integration of the subject-matters at university level presupposes teaching -
skills by using the corresponding programme of culture-oriented (content)

subject-matters, such as those of civilization and literature. It also means

teaching these subject-matters using different language skills.

the writing teacher goes beyond general (and monotonous) topics (related to -
life in general): such as sports, health, family..., and draws content from
literature and civilisation syllabi, as the examples in the following table

may illustrate:

Traditional writing topics	Suggested writing topics
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Write <i>a comparison</i>- -1 <i>contrast essay</i> in which you compare studying in high school and studying at university level. Write <i>a logical division</i> -2 essay explaining the reasons of the increase of violence rate in society. Write <i>an argumentative</i> -3 essay on the liberty of the press.	Write <i>a comparison</i>- -1 <i>contrast essay</i> in which you compare the political system in Great Britain with that of USA. Write <i>a logical division</i> -2 essay explaining the reasons of the economic decline that Britain witnessed by the end of the 1970s. Write <i>an argumentative</i> -3 essay on the concept of heroism in Hamlet.
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Table 1. Traditional vs. suggested writing topics

That does not mean to completely eliminate ‘life’ topics, but rather to strike a balance between the different kinds of topics in a way to make learners understand more easily the structure of different rhetorical modes by dealing with topics they have already come across.

- ultimately, teachers can use needs analysis to make learners reflect on their own learning, and select appropriate strategies to learn from different subject-matters, and apply different skills in all subject-areas. They would be guided as such to be autonomous learners (Wenden, 1991).

4. 3. Benefits

Such an instruction is seen to have several benefits for both teachers and learners.

4.3.1. Teachers

After a careful analysis of learners’ needs, and an adoption of a varied instruction to teaching the writing skill, EFL teachers are expected to

build on students' previous knowledge, focusing on what they know well so that they become aware of what they do not know and what they need to know; this is scaffolding, spend less efforts on explaining the writing lesson because students already know the content; teachers would rather focus on explaining the technical side on how the content should be organized according to particular rhetorical mode guidelines, meet with teachers of different subject-matters to discuss their courses and writing requirements, and together they develop strategies for working with their students, develop joint writing assignments and joint responses to these assignments (Smoke, 2001, pp. 133-134), and have a better understanding of students' needs in relation to language content and language form, and so provide assistance for these students in these areas

4.3.2. Learners

The overall outcome foreseen in such an instruction is to have a better understanding of student needs in relation to linguistic competence and cultural competence subject-matters, and to provide assistance for these learners in these areas. The hope is that these students use these skills to achieve academic success, and to apply these skills in their professional careers. It has become indisputable that learning goes beyond graduation from university and that "school and university students should be taught the necessary skills to enable them to continue learning effectively throughout their lives" (Hartley, 1998, p. 149)

Therefore, with CBI, learners are expected to feel safe and familiar with topics they have already studied, devote time and energy to work on form only (rather than struggle to thing about suitable content too) and so overcome their language writing anxiety, reinforce their understanding of the material they study in culture-oriented subject-matters by the same token, be trained to write in these subject-matters more accurately (in homework, research papers, or exams), improve their ability to analyse materials in content-based subject-areas, as they become aware of the significance of their technical side, and grasp the fact that language is a whole, with its technical and cultural components, and not separate 'islands' of courses

4.4. Challenges

There could be potential difficulties to the application of this instruction. For example, there may be a lack of time and of appropriate materials to foster both technical side and cultural side of writing. However, the most important difficulty would be teacher resistance to change. As teachers are not often used to collaborative teaching, or to integrating writing regularly in their teaching practices, many of them could be reluctant to begin a new form of instruction.

Teachers would be required to have knowledge that goes beyond narrowly defined specialization. There is, then, a necessity for a well-formed teacher who can deal with different types of topics relating to different subject-matters. What is needed is a theoretical and practical framework for teaching writing (or other skills) across the curriculum and in a content-based framework; moreover, there is necessity for a new methodology for culture-oriented subject-matters in which the teacher varies between productive and receptive skills. Therefore, there are some conditions for the success of this type of instruction.

4.5. Requirements for its success

First, and foremost, there should be a continuous needs analysis on the part of all teachers. In addition, collaborative teaching has to be implemented so that teachers exchange information about what students need to learn. Also, teachers of different subject-matters should provide each other with continuous evaluation of learners' needs and weaknesses, for an ongoing improvement in all subject-areas. As a result, teacher training and development have to be changed accordingly.

As for learners, teachers should make them

- perceive short and long term objectives in foreign language learning,
- analyse, synthesise, and evaluate authentic materials,
- become more aware of research and relevance of skills in all subject-matters,
- become aware of their learning strategies,
- develop their learner autonomy by pushing them to read, write and speak in the language,
- communicate with other students in other universities on a variety of topics.

At an administrative level, learners need more time to foster writing competence because of the importance of writing in all phases of their formal instruction. Syllabus design has to be based on clear objectives of what these learners are to become in the future, and taking into consideration students' level and expectations. For all these reasons, the EFL syllabus has to be readjusted accordingly.

5. Conclusion

At university level, EFL students still display unsatisfactory achievement in all kinds of competencies; their failure seems to be due to the disconnection existing between the teaching of 'form' and 'content' subject-matters. This paper suggests, then, the integration of subject-matters for a better-balanced

instruction, using the writing skill as model of 'form' subject-matters through which integration of subject-matters from other areas can be achieved. And as the aim of the writing course is to produce learners able to express themselves in the written mode for different purposes; an approach based on 'content-based instruction', 'writing across the curriculum', and 'genre pedagogy' represents an opportunity to provide learners with authentic contexts for writing. Nevertheless, in order for this instruction to work, there should be a continuous analysis to identify learners' needs, and so devise a corresponding teaching methodology. Furthermore, teachers have to work collaboratively in order to enrich the syllabus, facilitate teaching, develop learning, and help reach short and long-term objectives at learner, teacher, departmental and national levels. In fact, the idea in the integration of subject-matters is to build 'bridges' between the subject-matters (islands): bridges of meaningfulness, authenticity and relatedness. This integration would as such develop learners' linguistic competence as well as cultural competence. Thus, there is a call for institutional practices that would coordinate teachers' efforts in order to arrive to an agreement over 'what to teach' and 'how to teach'.

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