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## The Knowledge Base of Language Teachers

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### Introduction

Although teacher education and faculty development programs have been in existence for a long time, second language teacher education is a relatively recent development. However, in the last thirty years, there has been an explosion in the teaching and learning of second languages, both in the actual teaching and in the education of second language teachers. This has been particularly rapid in the field of English as a second/foreign language (ESL), which is the focus of this paper.

### Two Aspects

In examining pre-service ESL teacher education programs, we can recognize two major aspects. The first is the knowledge base or the information that we believe

our students must know. The second aspect is the way or ways in which that knowledge is delivered to our students.

The purpose of this paper is to understand the knowledge base with Content Based English Knowledge (CBEK) for the teachers of Engineering Colleges in their ESL classrooms. It is necessary to understand how these two aspects of second language pre-service teacher education come together. Without this understanding, we face the danger of randomly offering courses and other instructional activities for accidental reasons. An unstructured approach could result in a haphazard educational experience for our students.

### **Four Types of Knowledge**

Day and Conklin (1992) claim that the knowledge base of second language teacher education consists of four types of knowledge:

1. Content knowledge
2. Pedagogic knowledge
3. Pedagogic content knowledge
4. Support knowledge

1. **Content knowledge:** knowledge of the subject matter (what ESL/EFL teachers teach); e.g., English language (as represented by courses in syntax, semantics, phonology and pragmatics) and literary and cultural aspects of the English language.
2. **Pedagogic knowledge:** knowledge of generic teaching strategies, beliefs and practices, regardless of the focus of the subject matter (how we teach); e.g., classroom management, motivation, decision making.
3. **Pedagogic content knowledge:** the specialized knowledge of how to represent content knowledge in diverse ways that students can

understand; the knowledge of how students come to understand the subject matter, what difficulties they are likely to encounter when learning it, what misconceptions interfere with learning, and how to overcome these problems (how we teach ESL/EFL in general; or how we teach ESL/EFL reading or writing in particular, for example); e.g., teaching ESL/EFL skills (reading, writing), teaching English grammar, TESOL materials evaluation and development, EFL/ESL testing, TESOL program and curriculum evaluation and development, TESOL methods.

4. **Support knowledge:** the knowledge of the various disciplines that inform our approach to the teaching and learning of English; e.g., psycholinguistics, linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, research methods.

#### **The steps that individual teachers should take:**

- First, the ESL teacher consults with mainstream teachers to find out what units of other subjects ESL students will be studying in the next semester (long-term preparation) in various subjects. It should be noted that ESL students' English level is the guiding force in selecting reading materials since they read and write below grade level. Another important factor in deciding content areas is the ESL teachers' comfort level. Teachers should not force upon themselves a content area with which they are extremely uncomfortable. ESL teachers should choose a content area they feel comfortable with and enjoy teaching. They can gradually broaden selections of content areas as they gain more confidence and competence.
- Second, once a content area is selected, the teacher should decide what particular concepts or units from the chosen content area will be explored. That is, an ESL teacher cannot teach an entire curriculum of B.Tech 1<sup>st</sup> year thermodynamics. The teacher should pick one unit or two of great interest to ESL students or of great importance to their content learning. The teacher decides how detailed and

specific the content should be. However, it is important that the teacher teaches the core/essential concepts related to the specific content. If the teacher chooses to teach about the thermodynamics, he/she must teach what it is, its system, process, cycles etc. and all relevant vocabulary. Just learning thermo-related vocabulary does not count as CB.

- Third, the teacher chooses content-area reading materials according to students' English proficiency. Since content-area reading is loaded with difficult syntax and semantics, it is advised to go below the students' actual grade level. However, the materials should be age-sensitive. For example, a student of first year B.Tech with a limited English proficiency should not be taught with books written for 10<sup>th</sup> standard.
- Fourth, the teacher designs thematic unit lessons. To deal with a specific topic in an in-depth manner, lessons should have a series of related lessons under the same topic. For example, if the teacher teaches about system, the first lesson is to learn vocabulary and to build background knowledge on system by connecting it to their students' personal lives and reading to learn the major concepts of system. The second lesson is about process. The third lesson is to learn the cycles. The fourth lesson can be to learn and find out efficiencies of different thermodynamic cycle. The fifth lesson is to write an essay on the merits and limitations of different thermodynamics cycles, and the sixth lesson can have the students publish their essays in the college magazines. Although thematic unit lessons in this example consist of six lessons, the teachers might need 10 sessions of class time in real-life, depending on the students' level and the pace of learning.

### **Essential Ingredients**

While the teacher is following these procedures, some essential ingredients have to be present in implementing Content Based English Knowledge (CBEK).

- First, ESL students must read authentic texts. The teacher should include time for reading texts in every class--the students can repeatedly read the same part.
- Second, there have to be strong language learning components. The teacher has to design lessons in which ESL students must use academic oral English in the context of debates, group projects, or cooperative learning.
- Third, the teacher must integrate writing so that it is purposeful and meaningful in context--writing aids students' conceptual learning. The salient grammar points in a specific unit should be emphasized and reinforced throughout reading, writing, and speaking activities.
- Fourth, higher-order thinking and critical thinking skills should be reinforced through the use of real-life problem solving situations.
- Fifth, scaffolding is critical when ESL students learn abstract concepts. Hands-on activities and visual demonstration are considered part of scaffolding because they facilitate students' concept learning.

### **Problems Associated with ESL through Content Based English Knowledge**

First of all, ESL teachers can be easily discouraged by the demands of content knowledge and the amount of preparation they must do. Furthermore, they do not feel that they are qualified to teach content area. Thus, it takes a great deal of initiative and effort on the teachers' part. While the ESL teacher who adopts CBELK is responsible for teaching the content correctly, it should be noted that they are not responsible for ESL students' content learning in statewide assessments while the mainstream teachers are. As discussed earlier, ESL teachers should select a content area with which they feel at ease. With some research and preparation, ESL teachers can handle a unit or two out of the entire year of one grade curriculum.

Another problem associated with Content Based English Knowledge (CBELK) is that ESL teachers are too concerned with content area teaching and neglect teaching related language skills. The teachers seem to forget the main purpose of Content

Based English Knowledge (CBEK) which is to enhance English language development through content areas. If language components are missing, it cannot be called CBEK. The language learning aspect should take equal priority with the content learning aspect.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I examined the knowledge base of second language teacher education in an attempt to determine how the aspects of second language teacher education interact. I propose that the Content Based English Knowledge (CBEK) for second language teacher education program is one which integrates experiential and received knowledge in some systematic fashion.

In closing, I would like to make an observation. I believe we should take advantage of the method. But, in order to do so, we must first develop the literature to support the same. This can only be done with the collaboration of those involved in teacher education and the teachers in the field. This would have the additional benefit of empowering ESL/EFL teachers, as it would include them in the process of creating the knowledge base. The ESL teachers should think and make a beginning and give Content Based English Knowledge (CBEK) a try. The results will be rewarding.

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