

Original Paper

Bring the Dual Focus on both Language and Content into ESP Courses through Teacher Collaboration

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Abstract

In China, the evolution from traditional “College English” courses to English for Specific Purpose (ESP) reflects the changing demands for foreign language skills in specialized industries. This transition poses challenges for teachers due to limited specialized knowledge. This study explores the integration of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) into ESP courses through collaboration between language and content-area teachers. Drawing on a literature review and qualitative research at West Yunnan University of Applied Science, the study examines the challenges traditional English General Purpose (EGP) teachers face in ESP classrooms and their willingness to collaborate with content-area teachers. Results reveal teachers’ struggles with specialized knowledge and materials selection, alongside their openness to collaboration. The discussion emphasizes the importance of fostering cooperation, establishing teaching communities, and utilizing online platforms for enhanced student learning outcomes. This research contributes to the advancement of ESP teaching methodologies by advocating for collaborative approaches that integrate language and content effectively.

Keywords

EGP, ESP, CLIL, Teacher Collaboration

1. Introduction

In China, the traditional “College English” course typically refers to English for General Purpose (EGP), which aims to improve students’ English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills by imparting fundamental English knowledge. Recently, the demand for foreign language skills in various industries has become more diverse and specialized, posing a challenge for traditional EGP courses to meet learners’ needs. Consequently, higher education institutions have initiated extensive educational reforms, including the transformation of EGP into ESP (English for Specific Purpose). The ESP course

is designed to address specific goals and learner needs, emphasizing the cultivation of communication skills in using English for work in particular environments. However, traditional EGP teachers often face challenges due to limited specialized knowledge and related experiences during this educational reform (Liu & Chen, 2019). In such circumstances, a potential solution to this problem could be the collaboration between language teachers, specialized in language education, and content-area teachers, possessing professional knowledge.

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), frequently praised for its ability to boost language proficiency, is considered effective because of its emphasis on content rather than form and its requirement for higher cognitive engagement among learners (Vega, M. & Moscoso, M. L., 2019). Therefore, The study tries to investigate the possibility of the application of the CLIL model (bringing the dual-focus on both language and content) in ESP courses through collaboration between language teachers and content-area teachers. This is not a completely new teaching concept; rather, it represents a new stage of development in ESP teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1 EGP, ESP and CLIL in the Chinese Educational Landscape

Over the past decades, EGP courses have been put foreground of English language education in China. These courses are designed to provide language learners with a broad and comprehensive understanding of the English language, and with a well-rounded approach that prepares students for effective communication in various contexts. In order to cater to the specific linguistic demands of different professions or academic disciplines, ESP courses, which address the needs of students pursuing careers in specific areas, have gradually gained prominence. Evolving from the traditional “language-based” approach in foreign language teaching, it seamlessly integrates language skills with specific professional knowledge, makes full use of the utility and practicality of foreign languages, and emphasizes the acquisition of subject knowledge and improvement of language abilities.

CLIL (content and language integrated learning) is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language. That is, in the teaching and learning process, there is a focus not only on content and not only on language (Coyle et al., 2010). The 4Cs framework of CLIL is based on the principle that strengthening and deepening a learner’s conceptual understanding requires social, cultural, linguistic, and academic dialogic processes. The components of the framework are content, cognition, communication, and culture (Coyle et al., 2010). Content means progression in new knowledge, skills and understanding; communication refers to interaction, and progression in language use and learning; cognition is engagement in higher-order thinking and understanding, problem-solving, and accepting challenges and reflecting on them. Culture means “self” and “other” awareness, identity, citizenship, and progression towards pluricultural understanding. The interrelation among these four elements fully reflects that CLIL teaching is content- and culture-oriented, using language as the medium. It emphasizes communication between teachers and

students, aiming to enhance students' cognitive ability in professional content or culture (Gao, 2018). In China, though theories on ESP teaching and research are gradually enriching, there are still some shortcomings in the ESP course, including unclear curriculum characteristics, teaching tasks divorced from real situations, and learning materials that are neither suitable nor targeted. The mode of language and content integration advocated by the CLIL teaching concept aligns with the teaching objectives of ESP courses and holds significant reference value for the design and practice of ESP teaching.

Acquiring a second or foreign language is thought to be most successful when emphasis is placed on meaning rather than accuracy (Vega, M. & Moscoso, M. L., 2019). Though this strategy poses difficulties in achieving the desired language proficiency, it can be realized by fostering situations that promote meaningful language practice and usage (Burger et al., 2013). ESP is often discussed in language teaching research, emphasizing the use of meaningful and practical content. It functions to assist students in reaching specific communication objectives essential to various professions like nursing, engineering, and medicine, as highlighted by Gonzalez in 2015. Therefore, the dual focus both on language and content is not a completely new teaching concept; rather, it may represent a new stage of development in ESP teaching (Jiang, 2010).

2.2 Bring the Dual Focus on both Language and Content in ESP Courses through Teacher Collaboration

To enhance foreign language proficiency and integrate professional skills, many colleges and universities nationwide are implementing ESP courses. However, this initiative reveals challenges such as limited expertise among ESP teachers, scarce resources, and a lack of practical post-training evaluation. Improving ESP teaching quality and establishing a new model requires schools to bolster cooperation among teachers, foster partnerships with enterprises, integrate online and offline resources, and clearly define teaching objectives. Effective ESP teachers must possess expertise in English, proficiency in their field, and knowledge of ESP theories and teaching methods. Typically led by English or professional teachers, ESP teaching suitability hinges on these three aspects: English subject knowledge, professional expertise, and familiarity with ESP-related theories and methods. Based on this criterion, professional teachers can offer students specialized guidance; however, they exhibit deficiencies in English language skills during listening, speaking, reading, and writing, including inaccurate pronunciation, grammar errors, and other classroom challenges. Conversely, English teachers possess a strong language foundation but lack interdisciplinary professional knowledge, remaining limited to language learning and unable to fulfil students' needs for professional skills. As a result, ESP teaching encounters significant challenges, necessitating further improvement in teaching effectiveness. Addressing this, the collaboration between teachers in the "language" and "content" domains under the CLIL model emerges as a potential solution. Through collaborative ESP tasks involving professional teachers and college English teachers, this approach supports the content, cognition, culture, and communication aspects of professional English (4C framework). This not only enhances students' professional knowledge but also boosts their proficiency in professional English listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Team teaching involves planning and putting together two kinds of teaching, while “co-teaching” means shared instructions in the same classroom (Cook & Friend, 1995). There are three teaching modalities demonstrated by Perez-Vidal and Campanale (2005): language teachers can teach parts or all of the content subject; native teachers can work as content teachers or as language assistants; or language and content teachers can teach together in the same classroom. There are several ways of implementing the concurrency of content and language in the same classroom: first, one teacher teaches while the other plays the role of an unobtrusive assistant; second, teachers divide the class into two groups and teach simultaneously; third, both teachers deliver the same information at the same time (Cook & Friend, 1995). However, teacher collaboration is just about doubling the number of teachers. Other elements should be taken into consideration, such as “the adoption of common curriculum planning proformas and process”, and “the establishment of systematic mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, and feedback” etc. (Davison, 2006, p. 456). Furthermore, the most fundamental element of effective collaboration between language teachers and content-area teachers is the clear conceptualization of the task which “needs to be concerned with the broader notion of curriculum” (Davison, 2006, p. 456). Content-area teachers and language teachers can learn, communicate, share and cooperate with each other to ensure the success of an ESP course by integrating profound language skills, cross-cultural heritage, and professional content. In order to explore the feasibility of bringing the dual focus on both language and content into ESP courses through teacher collaboration within the context of West Yunnan University of Applied Science, this study employed qualitative research to answer the following two research questions: What are problems traditional EGP teachers encounter in ESP classroom? To what extent, are they willing to cooperate with content-area teachers?

3. Method

This research was conducted in the School of Jewelry, one of the largest faculties of the West Yunnan University of Applied Science. This university is one of the first batch of applied-oriented public undergraduate universities in China jointly built by the Ministry of Education and Yunnan Province. School of Jewelry offers 8 undergraduate majors, including gem and material technology, Product design, Arts and Crafts, leisure sports, preschool education, and automobile service engineering, Tourism geoscience and planning engineering and sports rehabilitation. By leveraging its developmental characteristics and practical experiences, the School of Jewelry has initiated reflections on teaching and classroom reform, aligning them with the ongoing teaching reforms both domestically and internationally. Considering that ESP courses are compulsory courses for most majors at this institution, this study employed semi-structured interviews as research instruments to examine the feasibility of introducing the CLIL model into ESP courses through collaboration between language teachers and content-area teachers can solve problems teachers encounter in ESP classrooms.

The participants’ names were pseudonyms and identifying details, such as the courses they deliver have been purposely made vague to protect privacy. They were made aware of their rights involved in this

study and gave their informed consent. Simon and Emma both obtained language-related bachelor's and master's degrees. Furthermore, they are mainly responsible for the EGP course at the School of Jewelry. We had face-to-face interviews to obtain vivid and in-depth qualitative data. My analysis of the data draws upon CLIL and teacher collaboration to examine their perspective and practice of teacher collaboration in ESP courses.

4. Results

Traditional EGP teachers may suffer from insufficient specialized knowledge, unqualified textbooks, and unskilled pedagogical principles when teaching EGP courses. Additionally, they actually tried to cooperate with content-area teachers in private and they value the possibility of cooperating with them. Deep inside, traditional EGP teachers may be unwilling to teach ESP courses because of a deficiency of related knowledge. They may find it easier to teach ESP courses which are related to social science, while struggling with those they are unfamiliar with. They explained this further:

I don't feel I am qualified to teach [Course Name], and I knew it at the very beginning. During the summer vacation, my director asked me if any teacher was capable of teaching this course. This task is a hot potato, you know, so nobody was willing to take it. Given I was the director of the teaching research office (jiaoyanshi) at that time, I would be the one. When I got the textbook, I felt more frustrated since I could barely understand the text. I have studied and worked in the field of social science for like 13 years, and I felt illiterate when reading words like "Departure angle" and "Toe-in".

-Simon

Since I began to work at this University three years ago, I have taught three different ESP courses, including [Course Name], [Course Name], [Course Name], etc. [Course Name] and [Course Name] were okay because they are related to social science. In contrast, [Course Name] was a nightmare as it is all about engineering. I really need someone who can help me with it.

-Emma

In addition, teachers are encouraged to select appropriate audio and video materials for ESP course teaching according to the college situation, students' needs and unit learning topics. ESP teaching materials design and ESP teacher training play a mutually promoting role. Strive to realize the virtuous circle of "promoting teaching by compiling" and "promoting evaluation by teaching", as for as shown in the comments below.

Even though the lecturer should be responsible for selecting a textbook, the textbook was actually recommended by the chair of [name of major]. He told me this book is comprehensive and professional, and I adopted this one about which I felt disjointed afterwards because this book failed to meet my students' needs. My students mostly come from underdeveloped areas and their English proficiency wasn't good enough for them to acquire knowledge from this book.

Therefore, when teaching this ESP course, I myself had to find appropriate audio or video materials and even design tasks.

-Simon

It is necessary for ESP teachers to develop relevant materials suitable for ESP instruction. The demand for appropriate teaching materials in ESP, requiring both subject expertise and English language proficiency, makes it challenging for teachers to find truly fitting resources despite the abundance in the market. In addition, ESP courses should employ a thematic teaching method, allowing the flexible creation and selection of materials to help students master professional knowledge and enhance their English proficiency. Comments below illustrate this point:

Unconsciously, I sometimes turn the ESP course into a traditional EGP course. I may attach too much importance to structure instead of meaning. When chatting with my colleagues, I realized that they had little knowledge of teaching ESP courses.

- Emma

Well, I did learn some theoretical stuff about ESP. However, learning is far different from teaching. It seemed that I could not control the ESP classroom in a good way.

- Simon

Traditional teachers are willing to establish a network cooperation platform leveraging the Internet to overcome constraints of time and space. This platform may facilitate collaboration between content-area teachers and language teachers in designing teaching courseware, syllabi, resource banks, and test questions. This collaborative approach is more likely to enhance work efficiency and improve ESP teaching outcomes. Lastly, teachers should also implement diverse evaluation methods. In ESP cooperative teaching, employing multiple assessment approaches, including evaluations by both English teachers and professional teachers, can encourage students to engage actively in their studies and provide a comprehensive understanding of their learning levels. One teacher stated:

You know, recently, teaching and learning in the School of Jewelry have gradually shifted from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred one. This transition entails moving from “what instructional design teaches, how teaching processes are executed, and how teaching evaluations are conducted” to “what instructional design entails, how teaching processes are facilitated, and how teaching evaluations are learned”. Team-teaching between traditional language teachers and content-area teachers may be one of the most effective ways for us to achieve this goal.

-Emma

We do advocate for a transformation in teaching methodologies—from knowledge-centric to skill-centric classrooms, from didactic to dialogic classrooms, from closed to open classrooms, from prioritizing rote learning to integrating learning and critical thinking, from emphasizing knowledge acquisition to integrating knowledge with practical application, and from valuing teaching above learning to valuing educators alongside learners. ESP courses pose a challenge

for all of us, so we really need to find a good way to resolve those changelings in ESP courses. I tried to communicate how to teach those courses with content-area teachers in private. They gave me some suggestive advice.

-Simon

5. Conclusion

Language teachers and content-area teachers should foster a sense of cooperation and establish a learning community. To address the isolated nature of ESP teaching, several ESP teaching pilot majors should be established within the College English Teaching and Research Office based on teachers' interests, guiding others in the field. Enhanced communication and collaboration within the teaching team can break down isolation barriers. Furthermore, even though coursebooks can scaffold by providing teachers with relatively professional materials and fostering students' learning strategies, coursebooks can be a debilitating crutch because they cannot meet the diverse needs of learners and teachers are less likely to be creative when they use coursebooks (Crawford, 2002). In terms of those irrelevant contents or tasks in the ESP learning environment, the ESP teachers should either change materials (adaptation) or add something new (supplementation).

Content-area teachers and language teachers can jointly use online interactive platforms to keep track of students' learning trends, share teaching resources, timely understand students' difficulties in learning and help them solve them. In addition to daily teaching work, teachers can cooperate to set up after-class discussions and Q&A groups. Content-area teachers can be responsible for solving students' questions about professional knowledge, sharing videos and articles of expert lectures in the group, and recommending useful books and periodicals for students. Language teachers can be dedicated to answering students' English language questions and cross-cultural communication questions and sharing listening, speaking, reading and writing skills with students. The two teachers complement each other and are indispensable. The two sides jointly build a network cooperation platform, the teaching form is no longer confined to the traditional classroom, and students can not only receive professional guidance from professional teachers but also be influenced by English teachers at any time, so as to better achieve the teaching goal.

Language teachers can mainly evaluate students' English language ability and encourage students to lay solid basic English skills by holding various activities such as English writing contests, scene English dialogue, spelling contests and listening tests on the subject. Content-area teachers can pay more attention to the examination of students' professional knowledge, specifically, they can hold professional knowledge competitions, professional practice and so on to evaluate, in order to encourage students to learn professional knowledge. Teachers from both sides can also jointly evaluate students' learning methods, learning attitudes and learning effects to form an objective and comprehensive evaluation. The comprehensive evaluation of students by professional teachers and English teachers can make students' professional ability and English language abilities develop comprehensively in ESP courses.

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