Content-Based Curricular Development:
Guidelines for Designing Effective Content-based Instructed Courses

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Abstract
The Japanese Ministry of Education’s plan to accept the influx of 300,000 international students by the year 2020, along with its vision to further internationalize higher education, calls for universities to provide more content courses taught in English in the near future and creates the need among many universities to find ways to provide content-based instruction in English that is level- and language-appropriate. While an array of commercially made EFL/ESL materials exist for majors such as business, instructors will have much greater difficulty finding level- and content-appropriate materials for other majors, such as law or international relations. As a result, many teachers, when faced with teaching a course where no suitable text exists, must create and develop their own content-based curriculum. This paper will address the basic steps needed to effectively design and create a content-based curriculum for a university-level EFL/ESL classroom. It will explore the varying definitions of content-based course and examine types of courses integrating language and content, the common challenges faced while writing a content-based curriculum, important guidelines to follow as the curriculum is written, and methods to gather and utilize teacher and student feedback for revision after the course has been taught.
Introduction

The task of developing level- and language-appropriate content-based curriculum can be a challenge for both the individual teacher or a university program. The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss five areas that are essential for designing effective content-based curriculum: 1) Defining Content-Based Instruction (CBI), taking into account the balance between language and content and examining the types of courses on a language-content driven continuum; 2) Recognizing the challenges and factors involved prior to writing the curriculum; 3) Writing clear, concise, sequential and level-appropriate lesson plans; 4) Collecting and incorporating teacher and student feedback into the revision of the curriculum; and 5) Careful planning, management, implementation, and support by the relevant institution.

Defining Content-Based Instruction

There are varying views on the definitions of content and content-based instruction. However, a key step in designing an effective curriculum that meets the needs of students, the instructors, and the specific program will be to identify and agree on a working definition of these terms. Chaput (1993) defines content as “any topic of intellectual substance which contributes to the understanding of language in general, and the target language in particular.” In this view, the goal of utilizing content in a classroom would be learning the language. Crandall and Tucker (1990) describe content as “academic subject matter” while Curtain and Pesola (1994) express content-based instruction as “curriculum concepts being taught through the foreign language.” These particular views represent an
ambivalent aspect of CBI in which the content itself is emphasized, but in a
language learning context. In light of these two perspectives, it will be
important for curriculum developers to answer the following questions
before designing curriculum: Will the course be a content-driven course in
which learning the content is the priority? Will it be a language-driven
course in which language learning tasks take precedence? Or will it be a
course that aims to emphasize both the language and content? A framework
provided by Met (1999), in Table 1, provides curriculum developers a
scheme to consider the balance between language and content that is
appropriate for each individual context. This continuum can assist teachers
in determining overall course objectives as well as the specific language and
content goals of each lesson.
Table 1. Continuum of Content and Language Integration
Source: M. Met. (1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content-Driven</th>
<th>Language-Driven</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Content is taught in L2.</td>
<td>• Content is used to learn L2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Content learning is priority.</td>
<td>• Language learning is priority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Language learning is secondary.</td>
<td>• Content learning is incidental.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Content objective determined by course goals or curriculum.</td>
<td>• Language objectives determined by L2 course goals or curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers must select language objectives.</td>
<td>• Students are evaluated on content to be integrated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students are evaluated on content mastery.</td>
<td>• Students are evaluated on language skills/proficiency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At one end of the continuum are content-driven programs, in which 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 content are those such as immersion programs in which the focus of instruction is on the content being learned 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 objectives. 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 meeting targeted language goals. Language learning is primary and content learning is secondary. However, for most programs, curriculum development and instruction fall in between these two extremes.

**Table 2: Content-Based Language Teaching: A Continuum of Content and Language Integration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Content-Driven</strong></th>
<th><strong>Language-Driven</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total immersion</td>
<td>Language classes with frequent use of content for language practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial immersion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered courses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct courses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme-based courses</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned, many programs fall in the middle of the continuum and need to use a blending of definitions to meet their needs. In Table 2, the continuum is further defined. Met (1999) shows that there are three basic approaches to language and content integration that fit in-between the two extremes: theme-based courses, adjunct courses, and sheltered courses. These approaches are all suited to university programs. Theme-based
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courses are language-driven. The aim of theme-based courses is for students to develop L2 skills and proficiency by selecting functional topics that contribute to language learning. Chaput (1993) defines the content of a content-based course as “…any topic of intellectual substance which contributes to the understanding of language in general, and the target language in particular.” This is similar to Met’s theme-based definition. An example of such courses are four-skill reading, writing, listening, speaking courses which use topical themes such as sports, food, and directions as language learning vehicles. Instruction is in the target language, with the learner’s knowledge and retention of the content purely incidental. Language instructors focus on evaluating L2 learners in terms of language growth rather than mastery of the content.

Adjunct courses fall in the middle of the continuum; both language and content are goals. In this type of course, students are expected to learn content and language simultaneously. Students are evaluated on their mastery of both the content material and L2. University level courses which can be considered adjunct courses include Business English, Travel and Tourism, and English for Academic Purposes. In adjunct courses, both the L1 and the L2 can be used as a means of instruction, unlike a theme-based course in which instruction is in the L2.

Like adjunct courses, sheltered courses exist in the middle of the continuum. In a sheltered course-based curriculum, courses are content-driven, but linguistically sensitive teaching strategies are employed to make content accessible in the L2. The subject matter is taught in the L2 at the language level of the students. Curtain and Pescola (1994) support this by stating “…curriculum concepts [are] taught through the foreign language…appropriate to the grade level of students.” Students are evaluated
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on their mastery of the content while language learning is incidental.

All forms of CBI in essence will integrate both language and content. However, one of the greatest challenges in CBI will be achieving the balance that is appropriate to a particular context. Murphey (1997) indicates, “The hardest task for most teachers seems to be in making their content area comprehensible and in avoiding the two extremes (p.123).” It will be important to consider this balance while establishing course goals and objectives during the lesson writing process.

Recognizing the Challenges and Factors Involved Prior to Writing the Curriculum

When developing curriculum for a content-based course, each teacher will be approaching a different context for writing lessons and course material. Teachers write content-based curriculum for diverse subject matter. Curriculum committees or individual teachers may be writing curriculum for all faculty members who are teaching the same course or may simply be writing curriculum for their own courses. In any situation, the context will dictate much of the style and content included in the curriculum.

Diagram 1. Challenges of Developing Content-Based Curriculum
(Brooks, 2004)
There are four areas that present challenges prior to curricular development. As seen in Diagram 1 (Brooks, 2004) these factors include areas related to students, teachers, materials, and external factors.

One of the first challenges facing curriculum writers will be to consider the varying language proficiency levels of the students. If possible, the students should be placed into classes according to their English abilities. Simultaneously, scheduling and class size should be arranged to reflect the overall goals and objectives of the course. Prior content knowledge of the students will be another factor to consider, as the students may or may not
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have a solid foundation in their first language in the content, let alone their second language. Student interest and motivation should also be taken into account prior to curricular development.

A second area of contextual challenges will relate to teachers and the instruction of content-based curriculum. It will be important for the curriculum developers to recognize the various teaching styles of instructors and their prior knowledge of the content. Some teachers may be intimidated by teaching a content-based course if they have little or no prior knowledge of the subject matter involved. This means it will be vital to orient instructors in both their approach to CBI and in the content that will be taught. It also suggests that lesson plans that are later developed need to be written clearly, concisely, and consistently, so instructors can focus on learning and teaching the content itself.

Locating materials for content-based courses can pose another set of challenges. Depending on what content is going to be taught, it may be difficult to find an appropriate textbook for the course due to difficulty of the text and/or the relevancy of topics within a textbook. Curriculum developers will need to consider multiple factors in selecting what kind of themes or topics to teach.

The final area that needs to be examined will be external factors, such as scheduling, budgeting, how students are organized, and the goals of the university or department that the content is related to. Many of these influential factors cannot be directly controlled by the curriculum developers. However, it will be important to communicate with the administration about essential needs (e.g., funding, time for curricular development, number of people involved, etc.) and to discuss the goals and objectives of the course.
Guidelines for Writing and Developing Curriculum

The following sections are meant to provide advice for curriculum writing that was applied by the author in his or her previous experience but could be easily adapted and applied to a variety of CBI writing situations.

Before beginning the writing process, creating a set of formatting guidelines to follow will ensure consistency, clarity, and continuity for individual lessons and the overall curriculum. Adopting clear writing guidelines is especially important when lessons are being developed by a committee. Lessons should incorporate a uniform style with clear instructions for any teacher to be able to pick up, preview, and teach. The lesson objectives should accompany activities used to achieve those objectives, and sufficient background content information should be included to provide adequate support for teachers.

Students jumping into a content-based course will invariably need vocabulary support for the multitude of content-specific words and terms. While writing content-based curriculum, it is important to identify key vocabulary and create a bank of words that students will need to learn in order to understand each lesson. Kate Kinsella notes, “Instructors in content-based classrooms can do their English language learners an immeasurable service by introducing them to a systematic and pedagogically sound method of vocabulary expansion (Kinsella, 1997, p. 64).” Writers should keep in mind that students must learn the essential vocabulary prior to the target lesson. Explicitly teaching the students strategies for learning vocabulary, stressing the importance of consistent study and using vocabulary assessment regularly will greatly increase the likelihood that students will be able to understand the content of the lessons.
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When writing curriculum for content-based courses it is imperative to limit the amount of material covered in the course. With the guidance of the teacher, this will enable students opportunities for repeated exposure to fully grasp the intended topic. Varying the activities and modes of instruction to cover a single topic helps to keep students engaged. As Stoller and Grabe write, “It is important not to overwhelm students with too much content. There are usually many ways to exploit interesting content for language learning purposes without moving through large sets of resources too quickly (Stoller and Grabe, 1997, p. 93).” For example, one lesson in a unit may include activities that focus on reading and making written responses to a content-based article, while the next lesson asks students to interpret charts and graphs and interact in small groups using the same content from the previous week. The content-specific language written and read in the first class gets “recycled” by the speaking and listening in the second class. Altering the tasks but working with similar content over a series of classes allows students the time necessary to comprehend and use language specific to the content.

Feedback and Revision

No curriculum is perfect in its initial form, so teachers creating a content-based course should be prepared to make significant revisions after the first lessons have been taught. Once the initial writing process has been finished and the piloting of lessons has begun, gathering feedback from both teachers and students is critical to the overall curriculum revision process. Planning ahead and creating opportunities to gather different types of feedback both during and at the end of the course is vital to receiving the input needed for proper revision.
Anonymous surveys that ask students and teachers specifically about activities, assignments, and vocabulary and provide space for written comments are helpful for gauging the overall perception of the curriculum and for finding common areas of concern. This type of feedback allows students and teachers to be frank about the curriculum without fear of offending the teachers or curriculum writers. Formal surveys of this type can be done several times over the course of the school year.

In addition to the formal, traditional survey format, more informal, but equally valuable, opportunities for feedback exist. Creating a “posting” space for comments online allows teachers to make remarks about lessons immediately after they have taught the lesson while curriculum problems are still fresh in their minds. This also benefits the curriculum writers who can quickly and easily gather feedback about specific lessons. Furthermore, one-to-one interviews or informal questioning with both teachers and students can also provide helpful feedback, but in these situations it is important to make a written record of comments so that they can be easily accessed and not forgotten when the time comes to begin revising the curriculum. Having frequent group meetings with teachers also provides opportunities for valuable discussion and gives opportunities for curriculum writers to collect teacher-generated ideas, which will be helpful for later revision. Regardless of the methods used, it is essential to gather feedback throughout the school year, to listen carefully to both teacher and student suggestions, and to make changes to the curriculum when necessary.

**Administrative Considerations for Content-Based Language Programs:**

I was previously engaged in writing a content-based curriculum for an introductory international relations course for second-year Japanese students at Asia University in Tokyo, Japan. The curriculum I developed was
used by a group of thirteen EFL teachers and was a required year-round course for their students. In this particular context, a textbook that was appropriate for the language level of the students and that covered content specifically relating to their major could not be located. Subsequently, I, as part of a larger curricular development team, helped to design and write materials and lesson plans for the class. Drawing upon previous experience working on a program-wide content-based course, I would like to share some insight into the curriculum development process and make recommendations to any teaching program as well as instructor who may be involved in a similar undertaking.

The process of curricular development, especially in cases which involve a whole department, all students studying a particular major, and/or more than several instructors, will require careful planning, extensive preparation and a long-term commitment from all parties involved. Diagram 2, titled, “The Curricular Development Sequence” (Brooks & Sandkamp, 2006) is one particular model that represents the numerous steps that are involved in the overall process of designing and developing curriculum. A time-frame of two-to-three years to discuss, plan, prepare, design, pilot, and revise the curriculum will be realistic for completing this type of project.

In developing content-based curriculum, there are several different approaches that can be taken to create materials for a one-semester or year-long course. One possibility would be to require each instructor to develop all curricular materials for the course individually. In this approach, teachers would have the most flexibility in terms of what content to teach and how to teach it. However, this approach would result in all teachers having to carry an equal load of the curricular development for a subject in which they may have limited knowledge and little or no teaching experience. The creation of
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this curriculum would need to be done while teaching a full schedule of English courses. Moreover, if twelve teachers are writing individually, there will be twelve different courses being developed—none having the same goals, objectives, and content. If the content-based courses are meant to be program-wide, it would be difficult to achieve the intended goals and objectives when each course is unique.

Another approach to developing curriculum would be to ask each instructor involved to write one or two lesson plans that would be used by the rest of the instructors. If there are twelve teaching weeks during the semester and twelve instructors involved, each teacher would only have to write one lesson per semester. This would lighten the load of curricular development for each individual teacher. However, this type of curriculum would lack consistency between lessons, have disconnected themes and activities, and have varying course goals and objectives.

To ensure that the course is consistent, organized, and clear in terms of what is going to be taught, one person could plan, design, implement, and modify the entire curriculum from beginning to end. However, the tasks and responsibilities involved in an immense curricular development project would be too great if handled by a single person, especially if that individual is teaching full-time at the institution. Therefore, I recommend that a team of four to five curriculum writers be formed to collectively work on the project. A group of this size ensures that the workload of curriculum development can be divided so it is not concentrated on a few individuals. A team of this size allows for each member to become an “expert” at the subject matter, and, at the same time, it is small enough for communication to be effective within the group.

I would like to make three recommendations to future administrators
involved in the formation of such a project group. First, recruit curriculum writers who are willing to invest the large amount of both time and energy it takes to create a content-based curriculum and are interested in the project’s topic, focus and objectives. Second, make group members aware that the project will be long-term and will need to be revised and regularly maintained once implemented. Ideally, group members should be committed to participate in the project for two-to-three years. If group members are selected from contract teachers, they should also be of different entry years so that it creates more continuity for subsequent revisions and updating of material. Finally, administrators should make efforts to decrease the teaching load of the teachers involved in such a project. Members of the curriculum team will be required to spend considerable numbers of hours meeting with the administration, professors from other departments of the university, staff members, other teachers in their own programs, and the project team to collectively discuss, plan, clarify, gather information or input, and make decisions about the curriculum. Simultaneously, the project team will need even more time to determine the course topics, decide what is going to be taught, search for materials, write and revise lesson plans, teach the actual content, and gather feedback about the course. Due to the immense amount of work involved in such a project, teaching schedules should be adjusted so the project team has the time to fulfill their project responsibilities without cutting into time to plan for other courses for which the teachers may be responsible. Concurrently, teaching schedules should also be structured so that all of the group members have a shared open time-slot so they can meet together as group.

I would also like to make three other recommendations related to the implementation and management of such content-based language programs.
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First, I strongly recommend that the initial curriculum writers and members of the project team create documentation and guidelines for future revision and development. If possible, the logic or reasoning behind the incorporation of particular themes into the syllabus, as well as explanations regarding why certain tasks or activities were included in the lessons, should be documented. In an institutional context in which instructors are limited to a finite contract, often newer members of an English language program may be asked to be involved with updating and revision at the beginning of an academic year. With the help of guidelines and/or details regarding content and teaching, this type of documentation can help ensure more continuity and assure the curriculum will be revised constructively. Second, administrators should plan and help organize orientation workshops for both instructors who are new to the course and those who have previous experience teaching the course. This can introduce the concept of CBI to those new to it as well as help remind the other teachers of its benefits and ways to overcome its challenges. This type of workshop could also be used as a forum for the discussion and sharing of teaching ideas, strategies, and materials that were effective. Support meetings during the semester will also be beneficial as a venue to share teaching ideas or opinions. Finally, both the administration and the instructors should take into account the wide range of language proficiencies among students. In a program-wide situation, the disparity between the top and bottom proficiencies could be quite significant. The difficulty of curricular content and language included in the lessons, how much pre-teaching of content and/or language will be needed, and the pace of lessons are elements that need to be accounted for in both curricular development and actual teaching. Whether teachers have the flexibility to alter the curriculum, both content-wise, in what they teach, and
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in the number of activities presented in a lesson, and/or have the ability to modify exams or assessment methods will also need to be discussed at length. Both discussions between teachers and the curricular writers and managerial direction within a program will be essential to the success of a content-based program.

**Summary**

Developing a content-based course can be a challenging and time-consuming task for any curriculum writer. Establishing where the course or language program will fit along the content/language continuum and how to balance language and content within should be the first step in this endeavor. Defining this first step allows teachers to then identify and address the challenges common to most content-based programs, such as the disparity in language proficiencies of students, lack of level-appropriate materials, and varying degrees of prior content knowledge of teachers. Once the writing process begins, curriculum writers would be wise to limit the amount of material presented to students and to find activities that allow students maximum exposure to course vocabulary and content. Lessons should be written clearly and uniformly and include background information so that teachers with less prior content knowledge can feel confident when presenting the curriculum to their students. As the course begins, curriculum writers should collect as much student and teacher feedback as possible to aid in their ongoing revision of the curriculum. Finally, administrators should also take measures to alleviate workloads as well as guarantee the maximum logistical and managerial support to the curriculum writers and teachers.
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References


Diagram 2. The Curriculum Development Sequence (Brooks & Sandkamp, 2006)