



# Language considerations in teaching English Content Based courses in the Colombian context

Ezana Eyassu Habte-Gabr

*Ezana Habte-Gabr teaches in the Foreign Language Department at Universidad de La Sabana. During the last year Ezana has been working with English Content Based Instructors in various faculties at the University, developing strategies and helping students with language problems, which is part of the Foreign Language Department's research area on Autonomous Learning. He has a Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Geography from the University of Iowa and Northern Iowa.*

## RESUMEN

El artículo presenta algunas reflexiones sobre la enseñanza de núcleos temáticos del currículo en inglés (English Content Based Courses), dentro del concepto de "inglés del mundo", el cual se refiere al uso del inglés con propósitos específicos, principalmente en el ámbito académico por personas que no son hablantes nativos del mismo, o al inglés que se utiliza en la academia a través del mundo, cuyos usuarios son principalmente hablantes de lenguas diferentes al inglés. La Universidad de La Sabana ha formado parte de la comunidad del "inglés del mundo", al incluir en los currículos de sus programas estos cursos. Además, el artículo contempla las inquietudes más frecuentes por parte de los estudiantes universitarios que toman estos cursos, con relación al acento del profesor, a su interés en utilizar la lengua inglesa en su proceso de formación, a las razones por las cuales se utilizan textos en inglés auténticos, y presenta algunas claves y estrategias para hacer que los cursos en "inglés del mundo" sean interesantes para profesores, instructores y estudiantes involucrados con este tema de gran actualidad.

## ABSTRACT

This article provides some insights into teaching English Content Based Courses within the realm of "World English" or English used throughout the world, whose users are largely non-native speakers in the academic world. Universidad de La Sabana, has been part of the "World English" community as it has been teaching English Content Based Courses (Course work in English.) This article provides answers to questions which are frequently asked by students who are in courses which use "World English" at the university level. Questions regarding the relevance of the teacher's accent, students desire to use the English language, reasons for texts in English, how to make a course in English interesting are addressed in the paper along with strategies for teachers, instructors and students in courses that are English Content Based.

**Key words:** World English, English Content Based Courses, teaching, learning, strategies.

## Introduction

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It is always said that the beginning of a class charts the destiny of the semester. We can go back to our own school days and recall that our initial impression of our teachers told us what to expect based on the way the teacher spoke, dressed and looked at us. For an English Content Based Course, the first day perhaps determines many other initial expectations. “How does the teacher talk?” “What is his accent like?” “Does he really like teaching in English?” “Am I going to understand him?” “Is the course going to be less demanding as it is in English?” “Is the course going to be more demanding?” “Would I need to make a greater effort to understand English and lose the content of the course?” These and other questions which we assume the student may have are important to consider and provide a response from the beginning. Some of these questions are not as important as others and students should be aware of this. Students for example should be aware of the fact that issues such as accent, occasional mispronunciation and spelling mistakes should be on the back burner of their concerns.

However, there are some questions which do deserve to be analyzed in the Colombian and Latin American context as a whole as the concept of World English is relatively new. World English refers to the use of English by non natives for specific purposes, largely in the academic sphere. World English has only recently been used at the university level in Colombia and Universidad de La Sabana has been a pioneer in this endeavor since 1997.<sup>1</sup> This paper consists of responses and strategies which are consid-

ered to be helpful to students, teachers and instructors in the context of the use of English Content Based Courses at the university level. These questions were selected because they are frequently asked and do merit consideration for English Content Based Teaching to be successful.

### 1. What is the teacher’s accent like?

#### Is it native?

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Students often use this as an issue when they evaluate a course. In the case of English Content Based Courses, this should be the least of the student’s concern. Why? A significant amount of English Content Based Teaching around the world is done by non native speakers. Think about the many of the teachers you may have had who were non natives. Imagine the number of former British colonies which use English as a medium for instruction. Unlike any other language in the world, the majority of speakers, educators and researchers are actually non natives!!! It has been noted that out of 1.5 Billion users of English only 375 million are native users.<sup>2</sup> More than two-thirds of the world’s scientists write in English and hence a substantial portion of them are non natives and of course, “they have an accent” Therefore, setting the stage for English Content Based Teaching and Learning at a global level is essential. Students should know that multiple accents come with the English Content Based Teaching.

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1 Pineda, Clelia and Ecima, Inés de Sánchez. Integrating Curricula Through English. Universidad de La Sabana. Department of Foreign Languages. Working Paper. 2000.

2 O’Dowd, Elizabeth, World English and Bilingual Education: Legacy and Lessons for the New Millennium. International Conference on Teacher Education. University of the Philippines, July 1999

Suggestions: It may be a good idea to share a recording or a story about a known figure in the subject you are teaching who used English as medium for instruction and writing and was non native. This would help contextualizing the environment from the beginning. Some examples are: Peter Drucker- Administration; Amartya Sen - Economics and Sigmund Freud - Psychology.

## **2. What would happen if I do not like speaking English?**

Undoubtedly, a course in a non-native language is not the easiest. Often students feel that content or the actual subject is being sacrificed as greater emphasis will be placed on language competencies. This is not the case. Students should know that they are taking the course in English because it is advantageous to their acquisition of the content. Therefore, the course will be as demanding as a course in Spanish. However, if students are aware of strategies to overcome language barriers, they will fare better in the course. Prior to introducing students to possible strategies, identifying the learning problems related to language is essential.

*“I don’t feel comfortable participating in class because there are three students who always speak better than the rest”*

It is important to get a feel for the level of your student’s speaking abilities on the first day of class. This will enable you to plan realistic speaking activities which permit everyone to participate. The worst that could happen in an English Content Based Course is having people participate only because their English is better than the rest of the

class. It is important that everyone knows from the beginning that everyone has something worth saying irrespective of their level of English. The use of specific strategies would diffuse this tension on the part of students.

Suggested Strategy: Have students get into groups on the first day of class. Let them introduce themselves to one another. Preferably, they could be with people who they do not know very well. As you move around the class, get feel for their level of English and try to get to know them. Talk to as many students as possible as you move around so that they would feel comfortable. The group would then elect a representative to introduce everyone. In some cases you could appoint representatives. If you notice that the speaking levels are greatly varied, you could use this format throughout the semester in order to promote more participation.

Through this process, students with greater speaking fluency could help students who are hesitant or who have limitations in smaller groups.

## **3. “Do I have to write in this class?”**

Writing is the means of communication in academia. Any university course must have some form of writing or the other. An English Content Based Course therefore should not be exempt from this form of communication. In fact, it should promote strong writing skills in the non-native language as sharing ideas at a global level is one of the final objectives of English Content Based Teaching. Therefore, effective writing could be attained if writing strategies are used contingently. However, it is important

to be aware of the fact that writing objectives in a course in a native language, namely Spanish, could be reached if it is done in a process. The following aspects should be considered:

- A student will not write a twenty page term paper!
- Writing in an English Content Based Course will be far from perfect
- A student may have poor grammar but could write a well structured essay
- A large number of students have not been exposed to formal writing

Often, writing tasks are not part of the course, they are an appendage. They are done outside the course with very little assistance from the instructor or professor of the course as it is assumed that students know how to write papers comparable to those written by the instructor or professor as a student. Moreover, students tend to procrastinate and not dedicate the required time for writing. As a result written work often does not meet the expectations of the course.

*Suggested Strategy 1: Writing activities should be woven into classroom activities and must have a long term objective such as a term paper or essay which uses sources. Having students begin writing and providing instant feedback would get them on their way. They could write a paragraph about their expectations of the course or a possible topic for research and read it aloud. This would be an opportunity to encourage them and also point out mistakes and grammar. Students*

*should also be aware of the external support they have from the language area or department to tackle writing problems.*

*Peer editing is also another approach towards solving writing problems. There is always another student who can help out.*

*Suggested Strategy 2: Have students identify non Anglo American names in a bibliography of the text being studied. Emphasize the fact that many of these authors also had to go through a process to write in a foreign language.*

Students could write short reaction papers or develop a project through the semester which would be followed up throughout the semester.

#### **4. “I don’t know why we have to read this text book”**

It is always frustrating to go through the laborious procedure of selecting a textbook and reading for a course and find that students find it cumbersome and monotonous. Often it is assumed that students read prior to arriving to class. Teachers sometimes use the stick approach of “ the chapter quiz”. However, there is a growing tendency of students being unable to use the textbook as they are unaware of the key concepts. It may be a good idea to talk about the text and tell the students why this text was selected. Furthermore in this day and age of information, they should be encouraged to search for supplementary information via the Internet and in the library.

*Suggested Strategy 1: Give students the main points of the text. Writing the key words and con-*

*cepts would be a good idea. Relate the class to the text and also encourage them to visit websites and suggest other books and journals to them. Identify the main journals related to the subjects of the course. You could even schedule a day in the library with them. We assume students are information gurus, but they are not, they are gurus of very select information channels which are remotely distant from the course!!!*

*Suggested Strategy 2: The fact that most research done by students can not be discarded. Therefore, it would be a good idea to let students be aware of the fact that they can find virtually anything about the course on the net. Tell them that if they enter key terms with commas in a web searcher they can find it.*

##### **5. “How could this class be interesting if it is in English?”**

Students learn more when they are interested and motivated. However, motivation at the university level depends on the student but could be enhanced by the teacher. First day activities could make a difference. Many of us who are teachers attended classes in auditoriums and were motivated because we knew how to take notes. However, assuming that students would proactively be motivated in such a manner is far from reality. As students seem to judge a course superficially, they would expect a “dynamic class”. This is difficult to achieve in an English Content Based Course as a non native language is being used. While it is difficult to achieve, creating an environment where the class forgets they are using English would be ideal. This is the biggest challenge!! Krashen notes that a second language is acquired if the focus is in its objectives as opposed to the

means. The means, which are the four language competencies should be sharpened as the final objectives are achieved.<sup>3</sup>

Levels of anxiety are much more higher in an English Content Based Course, contributing to a somewhat more difficult atmosphere. Some anxiety may be necessary for some students to maintain a level of responsibility. While this aspect may be the least pedagogical in our discussion, it is of utmost importance as the student’s attitude towards the course would be negatively impacted. Often difficulties in English Content Courses arise due to anxiety. Students who are unable to cope with excessive amounts of anxiety tend not to perform well. An English Content Based teacher who lectures all the time would perhaps face difficulties in detecting this major obstacle in the learning process.

*Suggested Strategy 1: Humor. Perhaps you could tell your students about an early experience you may have had as a student in an English Content Based Course. Intentionally make a mistake and laugh with them!!*

*Suggested Strategy 2: Demonstrate the importance of skills other than language. Make every one feel that they are an asset. Students should know what the objectives of the course are and that it is absolutely possible not to be the best English speaker and to meet the objectives of the course. In mathematically oriented content courses, it is not uncommon to find students whose language skills are weak, but have strong mathematical skills which allow them to easily meet the bulk of the objectives. With a little help in writing they should*

3 Krashen cited in Papai, Nicole. Literary Development through Content Based Instruction: A case study.  
<http://www.wpel.net/v16/v16n2Papai.pdf>

be able to discuss procedures and results. If the mathematically skilled student who has poor language skills is convinced that he or she can help a student who is more advanced in the language component and not in the mathematical aspect, the student will be an asset to the course.

*Suggested strategy 3: The use of laughter and music as external and internal relaxation techniques should be encouraged.*<sup>4</sup>

**6. I know English is important, but we live in Colombia and most work is not conducted in English. Therefore, can this class not be bilingual**

Many English Content Based Courses around the world exist because of the heterogeneity of the classes. The classes are composed of students and teachers who speak different languages and English is the only one they have in common. European, African and Asian universities have the tendency to use English as the medium for instruction for this reason. Leeuwen and Wilkenson (2004)<sup>5</sup> note that as Europe has integrated, the need for preparing students for English Content Based teaching has increased.

The Latin American context is quite different as most learning occurs in the context of the mother tongue, save for the cases of indigenous groups who normally study in Spanish. Therefore, while there is a consensus that English is important, the urgency is not as marked as in the case of other regions of the world where there is no common lan-

guage other than English. In the Latin American setting, Spanish or Portuguese are common to lingua franca to the group. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on highlighting the factors which make English important or essential for delivering the particular subject.

*Suggested Strategy 1: Students should be very clear about the language requirements of the job market they are entering. Constantly providing data on the job market of their career would keep them on track in regards to the language requirements.*

*Suggested Strategy 2: Require students to conduct literature searches from non Latin American countries on the subjects they are studying.*

**7. How am I guaranteed that I will not lose the content due to the foreign language?**

Usually when courses are prerequisites for other courses, national or international exams, the concern of acquiring content is always of concern to the student and teacher. It is not unusual for the content teacher who speaks the native language of a homogenous group to drift away from English as the course content is at a risk. Students often feel that content is at a risk in the following situations.

- a) Lower output compared to a course held in the native language

Students who do well in courses in their native language and not so well in a content course tend to feel at great risk due to the language.<sup>6</sup> These students mainly have pro-

4 Oxford, Rebecca (1990). *Language Learning Strategies: What every teacher should know*. Heinle & Heinle Publishers. Boston.

5 Leeuwen, Van Charles and Wilkenson, Robert (2004). *Multilingual Approaches in University Education: Challenges and Practices*. Maastricht. Universiteit Maastricht.

6 Two students in a group interviewed by the English Content Research group at La Sabana University expressed the need for external support in order to maintain the academic level they had in other courses

blems in tasks which involve writing and oral presentations. They find themselves bogged down with language skills and feel that they have sacrificed content as a result. Teachers who are unaware of strategies or external help tend to resort to the native language as they are confronted by the problem. Lack of clarity of the importance of the foreign language for content is also another reason for the sudden switch to the native one. The student should "...view the target language largely as the vehicle through which subject matter content is learned rather than as the immediate object of study" (Brinton et al., 1989, p. 5).<sup>7</sup>

*Suggested Strategy 1: Identify these students from the very onset. Make sure that they understand the advantages of taking the course in English. The student should be aware of the fact that the course in English provides more access to content.*

*Suggested strategy 2: Have students with language problems get into touch with teachers or other professionals who faced similar problems while they were studying. Students will know that these problems can be overcome.*

#### b) Meeting International Exam Standards

Bilingual education has often come under scrutiny when it has been short of preparing students for national exams which are in the native language. O'Dowd (1999) notes that in the Philippines modifications were made to the national curriculum, reducing the amount of English so students would be better prepared. Colombian university graduates must now take national standardized exams in order to graduate. Therefore, natu-

rally, the concern of how English Content Based Courses would be a concern. This concern could be diffused if appropriate strategies are utilized in an English Content Based Course which could perhaps enhance the preparation for such exams as opposed to being a barrier.

*Suggested Strategy 1: Important contents being covered in English Content Based Courses which are vital for national exams should be identified from the beginning. These contents should be accompanied with a bilingual glossary in the course outline or possible websites which contain the relevant vocabulary.*

*Suggested Strategy 2: Students should be convinced that their exposure to material in English is an advantage as they would be able to expand their responses to questions with more information, showing examiners that they have a broader and more global insights regarding the topics.*

#### **8. If my professor is not an English teacher, who will help me with the language component?**

One of the greatest misnomers of English Content Based Courses is that its primary objective is the teaching of English as opposed to academic content. It is not uncommon for a student to expect an English teacher to teach the course. However, this is not the case. The language acquisition should be a normal and natural process with clear objectives from the instructional and learning perspectives. Students and teachers have benefited from external help also known as "sheltered teaching". As North American learning institutions were confronted with the challenge of teaching non native language students mains-

<sup>7</sup> Cited in University of Minnesota Content Based Group. <http://carla.acad.umn.edu/CBI.html>.

tream courses, external language support became necessary for students not to fall behind native speakers. Students are able to obtain help from a specialized language teacher who closely works with the mainstream course. With prior notice, this instructor can assist the student with writing and speaking tasks outside the class. If the student knows what the tasks are, he/she could begin with working with a sheltered teaching instructor from the beginning of the semester.<sup>8</sup>

*Suggested Strategy: Tell students that their English should not be a barrier if they are aware of their language shortcomings from the beginning. They should start working with a language instructor outside class who has been informed about the course and its requirements. Prior to meeting with the instructor, the student must prepare the task and the instructor will give them feedback. Students should know that success is noticeable if they begin well in advance.*

Preparation for an English Content Based Course does not have to be laborious but

rather based on developing a rapport with students - a rapport which would inform them and eliminate myths about such courses which have complicated the delivery of content in English. Students should know that they would be successful if they are aware of strategies and identify their difficulties from the beginning. Emphasis should strongly be placed on planning the course, considering all the potential obstacles that may occur through well analyzed strategies.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Nohora Bryan, director of the Foreign Language Area for introducing me and assigning me to the area of English Content Based Teaching.

I would also like to thank Andres Salazar of the Humanities Institute for his comments and suggestions on making the article of use to teachers, instructors and students.

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<sup>8</sup> This approach has been used for a business course on Organizations at La Sabana taught by Luis Hernando Ramirez PhD since 2003. Students were able to obtain feedback on writing and speaking tasks from the Foreign Language Area.