



Towards a cross-curricular awareness for ESL teachers in Cameroon



Review article



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Abstract

The effective teaching of English as a Second Language in a nonnative context such as Cameroon requires, amongst other things, the use or simulation of real-life situations in the classroom. Some of these real-life situations tend to issue from other subjects on the curriculum, a fact which necessitates cross-curricular awareness on the part of teachers of English. The goal of this study was, first, to account for the extent to which content from other subjects feature in the official English language coursebook used in secondary schools in Cameroon, and second, to establish the importance teachers of English attach to possessing knowledge across the curricular, as well as their readiness to teach English through content availed in other subjects. The thematic analyses of the corpus and a computation of the survey responses, revealed that the real-life situations explored in the different modules in the coursebooks are traceable to 9 (75%) subjects on the curriculum. Also, though most of the English language teachers surveyed acknowledge the importance of cross-curricular awareness, their readiness to teach English through content is limited to arts-inclined content. We recommend the institution of a cross-curricular awareness benchmark for teachers of English.

Keywords: cross-curricular awareness, content and language integrated learning, content-based instruction, the competency-based approach

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Public Interest Statement

My experience as a teacher of English as Second Language in Cameroon inspired the topic of this research paper. Most research endeavours within the context of English language teaching in Cameroon have mostly dwelt on approaches and methods such as Communicative Language Teaching, the Competency-Based Approach to English language teaching, and the use of Information and Communication Technologies. This study sheds light on the role and importance of adopting a cross-curricular approach to teaching English as a second language in Cameroon. The findings in this study are relevant to pedagogic inspectors and teachers of English especially in Cameroon.

Introduction

Teachers of English in nonnative contexts are often faced with many challenges, one of which is the need to possess knowledge across the curriculum. This is the case, first, in situations where English is both the language of instruction and a subject on the curriculum and second, where English is taught as the only subject as in often the case in language centres. One compelling argument for the need for teachers to possess knowledge across the curriculum is because language is not taught in a vacuum. While the principal content of English language teaching is (arguably) grammar, with the goal to empower learners to understand and communicate effectively, the discourses often used are drawn from across the curriculum. For instance, reading, speaking, and listening passages are often sourced from or related to other disciplines such as physical education, economics, environmental science, political science, law, and health sciences to mention but these.

The need to integrate different disciplines into the teaching of language had been articulated by Deller and Price (2007) in what they call Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). According to this approach, the teacher of language is expected to dwell on the content of a passage while simultaneously providing the language support that is needed by the learner to make sense of the content. In other words, CLIL involves imbedding vocational content into language teaching and/or including language learning elements in the teaching of vocational content. In practice, Kaseva, & Schwartz (2006) have suggested that 'students in vocational streams can learn Aeronautics, Biochemistry, Cookery, Catering, Law and ICT through English and/or French' (p. 13) This integration has the potential to secure the possibility of acquiring language competence as well as effective communication skills in context. As pointed out by Gracia (n.d.), CLIL not only guarantees the acquisition of a deepening intercultural awareness but works towards increasing the linguistic competence of learners. Because of the importance of CLIL, its application has taken root in many European countries

(Eurydice, 2012). Though relatively new, CLIL has registered a number of successes. For instance, learners within a CLIL framework have been shown to wield more skills than those in non CLIL programmes (Gracia, n.d.). Nonetheless, the application of this teaching approach is fraught with methodological setbacks. As noted by Darn (n.d.), besides the fact that CLIL has a poorly defined methodology, CLIL teachers lack training, and the materials are scarce. Nonetheless, the gains that this approach offers have proliferated the application of CLIL across many countries. As reported by Kaseva, & Schwartz (2006), different countries across Europe have experienced using CLIL with different contents in vocational training in focus. These include Nursing and Health Care, Business Administration, Tourism and Hospitality, Immigrant Training, and Company Training (in Finland); Economics and Business Administration, Engineering, Translation Studies (in Latvia); and Information Technology, Corporate Finance, Marketing and Management (in Poland). Deller and Price (2007) have also outlined steps by which language could be taught through the agency of subjects such as geography, chemistry, mathematics, religious studies, biology, environmental studies, and many others.

A related term which emphasizes the synergy between content and language is known as Content-Based Instruction (CBI). As articulated by Mohan (1986), "in subject matter teaching, we overlook the role of language as a medium of learning. In language learning, we overlook the fact that content is being communicated" (p. 1). Mohan's observation underscores the dislocation between content and language that has given impetus to language instructional approaches that have a basis in content. As reported by Lou (2015), content-based English teaching in the post-massification period retains the potential to improve the level of motivation and English language abilities of learners of English, though CBI is not suitable for poor English learners who do not have a commendable mastery of the language. Other studies (Cenoz, 2015; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Stoller, 2004; Tedick & Wesely, 2015) have equally pointed out that a content-based approaches to teaching a language is one means by which learners' knowledge of content can be enhanced. In their study, Herrera et al. (2015) found that the teacher of English under study were not inclined to recommend CBI as a suitable approach to teaching English though they had been trained using the same approach. Nonetheless, however, in most of the schools they studied, there was a tendency to rebrand teachers of English as Content Based Instructors. This conflict underlies most of the research literature on CBI. While others (Boivin & Razali, 2013; Corrales and Maloof, 2009), see in it, a potential to positively diversify and improve teaching and learning outcomes, others (Cenoz et al., 2014; Coyle, 2008; Pérez-Cañado, 2012) point to the application challenges thereof. One of the major challenges of CBI as

pointed out by Herrera et al. (2015) is that there is no consensual "rule book" as far as applying CBI is concerned.

In Cameroon, English and French are taught and spoken as the official languages. While English is taught as a foreign language to those who access content in other subjects in French, it is taught as a second language to those who access content in other subjects on the curriculum in English. In the case of the latter, English is taught in secondary schools alongside other subjects in different academic orientations such as arts, sciences and commercial studies. An observation of the mandatory coursebooks used in the teaching of ESL in Cameroon reveals that they expectedly feature cross-curricular content, especially in sections such as reading, speaking and listening. Some of the texts deployed in these sections feature diction and register that can potentially challenge an ESL teacher who lacks an awareness of cross-curricular content. There is also a tendency within secondary schools in Cameroon for teachers of other subjects to recourse to English language teachers for clarifications on issues of comprehension in their content areas. In the same light, while learners tend to disregard the linguistic infelicities that stem from the discourse of teachers of content this is not the case for teachers of English. As regards vocabulary, for instance, a teacher of English is unlikely to be glossed over for not knowing the meaning of a particular word or expression no matter how technical it is or how steeped it might be in the jargon of a specific discipline. This therefore puts enormous pressure on the teachers of English to master not only their own subject matter but to have, at least, a basic understanding of cross-curricular content. This basic understanding is needed at least to deal with the cross-content that features in the coursebooks in force. The introduction of the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) to ESL instruction in Cameroon in 2012 also makes a case for the need cross curricular consciousness on the part of ESL teachers. This is because, the CBA to ESL instruction advocates modularised instructions (Auerbach, 1986) in which real life situations are used to enable learners gain the competence to communicate in authentic situations. Some of these authentic situations tend to relate to cross curricular content, an understanding of which can enable the ESL teacher to effectively cater for learners' communication needs as far as content is concerned. In the light of this understanding, the current study set out to answer the following three key research questions:

1. What cross-curricular areas are covered in the real-life situations used in the teaching of ESL in Cameroon?
2. How important is cross curricular knowledge to ESL teachers in Cameroon?
3. To what extent do ESL teachers possess knowledge of the different cross curricular areas identified?

Methods

This study made use of the qualitative method of data collection. Data were collected from two main sources. The first source was thirty English language teachers drawn from randomly selected public (15), confessional (10) and lay private (5) grammar schools. These grammar schools, offer two academic orientations which are arts and science. This study deployed two research instruments for data collection. The first was the corpus which comprised the contents of Books 2 and 5 of the ESL course book *Mastering English*. The choice of Books 2 and 5 was motivated by two reasons. First, they represent both junior and secondary school levels. Second, while Books 1 and 2 have the same modules which differ in content, Books 3, 4 and 5 have the same modules with variations at the level of content. Meanwhile, it was needless to stratify the contents according to the different skills such as reading, listening and speaking because in line with the CBA to ESL instruction currently in use in Cameroon, the coursebook (*Mastering English*) is designed to ensure thematic unity in each of the real-life situations. For instance, if a unit centres on health, the reading, listening and speaking texts necessarily feature content based on health. The titles of the different units were grouped according to the various themes to determine their association to various subjects in the curriculum of secondary education (See appendix 1). Where the title of a unit corresponded to a theme but not to any probable subject area, a dash was noted. In cases where the title of the unit included different topics, the relevant topic(s) was/were highlighted and the subject area identified.

Meanwhile, the second research instrument was a questionnaire survey which was used to elicit the 30 ESL teachers' opinions about the importance of cross curricular knowledge as well as their familiarity with content from different curricular, and the strategies they deployed to handle content-related challenges in their classrooms. Of the 30 ESL teachers, 12 had work experiences of less than 10 years, while 18 had work experiences of 10 years and above.

Results

The results obtained in this study are presented according to the three key questions posed. In order to account for the range of cross-curricular areas covered in the range of real-life situations in the coursebook used in the teaching of ESL in Cameroon, a thematic analysis of the various titles of the real-life situations was undertaken (See Appendix 1). The findings on Table 1 below, indicate that up to 9 subjects, taught in secondary schools in Cameroon, are covered in the real-life situations covered in corpus. This represents 75% of the total (12, with the exclusion of Mathematics, English and French) content subjects available to Forms 1-5 students (see Tambi, 2016). These twelve

subjects for grammar students include: Biology, Chemistry, Physics, History, Literature, Geography, Economics, Commerce, Information and Communication Technology, Logic, Citizenship, and Home Economics. Of the 9 subjects identified in the corpus under study, Biology emerged the most frequent (32.35%) followed by Citizenship (17.64%) and Geography (11.74%). Meanwhile, Literature and Home Economics recorded the lowest frequencies (2.94% each).

Table 1. Summary and Frequency of subject areas identified

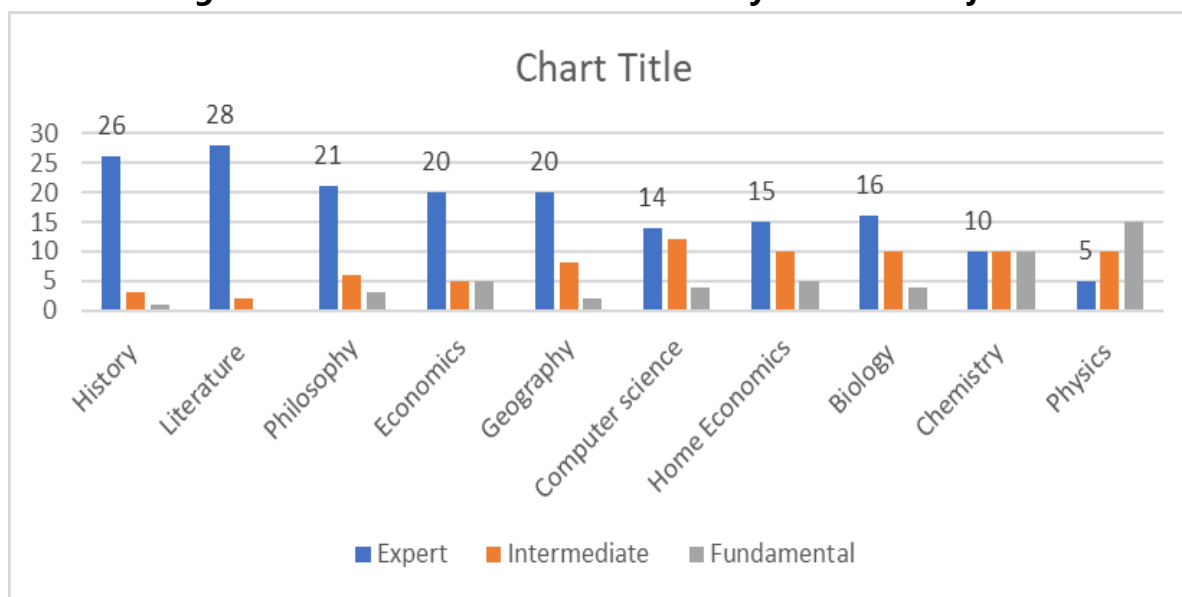
SN	Subject	Frequency	%
1	Commerce	2	5.88
2	Biology	11	32.35
3	Home Economics	1	2.94
4	Geography	4	11.74
5	Citizenship	6	17.64
6	Economics	3	8.82
7	Literature	1	2.94
8	History	3	8.82
9	Computer Science	3	8.82
	TOTAL	34	100%

The findings on Table 2 point to the importance ESL teachers in Cameroon attach to cross-curricular awareness. As revealed on the table below, a majority (25) of the 30 teachers sampled in this study claimed that their knowledge of other subjects facilitates their teaching of ESL while only an insignificant minority (2) disagreed. Similarly, most (20) of the teachers acknowledged that they frequently encounter cross-curricular terminology in the course of their teaching while a minority (4) disagreed. In the same trend, the tendency by teachers of other subjects to rely on ESL teachers for comprehension issues was attested by a majority (27) as only 1 respondent disagreed. Finally, most (24) teachers shared the conviction that their learners communicate better when they understand content information. Only 3 teachers disagreed. As revealed by the mean values, a majority (24), represented by 80%, of the teachers acknowledged the importance of cross-curricular awareness in ESL instruction.

Table 2: The importance of cross-curricular awareness for ESL teachers

Importance criteria	Agree	%	Neither Agree nor Disagree	%	Disagree	%
1. My knowledge of other subjects facilitates my teaching of English	25	83.33	3	10	2	6.66
2. I frequently encounter terminology that requires an understanding of other subject areas	20	66.66	6	20	4	13.33
3. Teachers of other subjects rely on me for comprehension issues in their subjects	27	90	2	6.66	1	3.33
4. My learners communicate better when they understand content information	24	80	3	10	3	10
Mean	24	80	3.5	11.66	2.5	8.33

Regarding the extent to which ESL teachers master content from other subjects on the curriculum, a self-rating prompt revealed that most of the ESL teachers tend to master the content of subjects in the arts (History, Literature and Philosophy) than in the sciences (Biology, Chemistry, and Physics). For instance, while between 21 to 28 of the 30 subjects under study claimed to have expert knowledge levels in the arts subjects, the range was 5 to 16 for science subjects. Interestingly, between 14-20 of the ESL teachers claimed to have content mastery in subjects such as Economics, Geography, Computer Science, and Home Economics, which are generally common to both arts and science orientations.

Figure 1: ESL Teachers' Level of Mastery of Other Subjects

Discussion

The findings in this study raise a number of important issues which relate to the effective teaching of ESL, especially in secondary schools in Cameroon, where English is both a subject on the curriculum and the language of instruction in other subjects. However, the reading, listening, and speaking content in coursebooks used for ESL instruction in Cameroon Secondary schools often have a bearing on other subjects. As revealed in the current study, cross-curricular content in the ESL coursebook under study totals up to 75% of the various subjects taught in Cameroon secondary schools. The presence of cross-curricular content in an ESL coursebook is not unexpected when one considers Fiamini's (1998) view that language is not taught in a vacuum. This implies that language needs to be learnt in context if learners hope to attain the competence to communicate using the register appropriate to different topics of discussion. The 9 possible subject areas identified in the current study provide sample contexts within which ESL in Cameroon can be taught. Using these subjects as a basis or context for the teaching of ESL aligns with what Cenoz, (2015) has described as a content-based approach to teaching language. Nonetheless, Coyle (2008) has pointed out the lack of a 'rule book' regarding the application of this approach, as a major challenge. This does not, however, disrepute this approach especially in a context like Cameroon where learners tend to grapple with English language-based comprehension issues when accessing content in other subjects.

The quality of importance attached to cross-curricular awareness by teachers in this study speaks of its pedagogic gains. Given the substantial experience of the teachers in this study, their views about the importance of integrating content in

language teaching is deserve attention. As noted by Elabbar (2017), teachers not only convey ideas and practices but are a source of knowledge of the learners entrusted in their care. One evidence of the importance of this approach is found in the work of Herrera et al (2015), who reported the tendency for teachers of English to be rebranded as Content-Based Instructors, the irregularities with the approach notwithstanding. This tendency might also underly the claims made by teachers in this study to master (mastery indicated by 15 or more of the respondents) up to 7 out of the 10 subjects (see Figure 1) enlisted for self-rating in this study. The fact that the subjects with the highest claims for expert knowledge are arts subjects is explainable by the fact that ESL teachers in Cameroon have an orientation towards the arts. Interestingly, however, the subject with the highest frequency (see Table 1) of appearance in the coursebooks was Biology (32.35%), which is within the sciences. Given that only 16 teachers (see Figure 1) of ESL claimed to master content in biology, might imply that about half (14) of the teachers of ESL have challenges coping with a majority of the real-life situations presented in the two texts under study. These challenges may not be faced when handling content from subjects such as Citizenship and Geography which ranked second and third respectively in the frequency analysis (see Table 1). Up to 20 (66.66%) respondents, for instance, claimed to have expert levels of mastery of content from Geography. In line with this finding, Deller & Price (2007) have outlined steps by which language could be taught through other subjects irrespective of their orientations. In a similar finding, Kaseva, & Schwartz (2006) have noted that subjects such as Aeronautics, Biochemistry, Cookery, Catering, Law and ICT can be learnt through English and/or French. It is therefore vital for teachers of ESL in Cameroon to take advantage of the content that is communicated through language to improve pedagogic outcomes as attested in previous research findings (Boivin & Razali, 2013). Based on the results of this study, we recommend the following:

1. Stakeholders in ESL instruction in Cameroon should define and institute a benchmark for cross-curricular awareness for all teachers of ESL.
2. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach should be introduced to complement the CBA to ESL instruction as this can enhance effective communication in real-life situations.

Conclusion

Coursebooks are resourceful in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language in non-native contexts such as Cameroon. Writers of these coursebooks do not write in a vacuum. As necessitated by communicative language teaching syllabuses, the coursebook series currently used in the teaching of English as a Second Language in Cameroon provides a vast array of topics that inform the context of English language teaching and learning. An analysis of the topics reveals significant approximations to other subjects on the curriculum of secondary school education in Cameroon. English language teachers' awareness of other subjects on the curriculum is therefore crucial for a fuller attainment of the goals of English as a Second Language teaching in Cameroon.

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Author Biography

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