

An Analysis of the Content-based Syllabus in Higher Education

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Abstract. The syllabus is considered not only a crucial component of the curriculum in an effort to introduce the course but also a potent instrument to support instructional activities [18]. Additionally, it also takes into account learners' requirements and diverse learning situations [8], which deserves profound investigation for both pre-service and in-service English teachers [12]. Therefore, this study aims to elaborate on the way in which the content-based syllabus (CBS) can best suit the anticipated teaching context for law faculty students in a university in mainland China. This paper comprises five main parts, starting with a brief literature review pertaining to various syllabus types, which can be broadly categorized as synthetic or analytic, and product-oriented or process-oriented. After that, the chosen English teaching approach, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) will be explained. The author then discusses the adaptability between the chosen syllabus and students' requirements under specific learning and teaching context, and this will be followed by several effective strategies to facilitate the implementation of the CBS. The final section will reiterate authors' stance prior to summarizing the main argument on the significant effects of CBS on higher education. Also, the relevant limitations and implications regarding this analysis that might be useful in future research will be depicted..

1 INTRODUCTION

Syllabus refers to a specific yet unclearly defined course outline which includes teaching materials, instructional contents, objectives, and so forth [17]. According to Reilly [16], a syllabus, particularly in linguistic practices, primarily encompasses two respective dimensions, disciplinary planning, and language development. It also contrasts with a broad concept of a curriculum which values the endeavors of various contributors to conceive the blueprint for a pedagogical program [2]. In general, a syllabus can be classified into synthetic and analytic ones and product-oriented and process-oriented ones as well [15].

Based on these two categorizing schemes, Benbellal originally listed six subtypes of syllabus [5]. There are three subordinating branches in the synthetic and product-oriented kinds. Firstly, a structural syllabus, also known as grammatical syllabus, focuses on imparting the grammatical structures of the target language [16]. Apart from that, it is crucial to propose a notional-functional syllabus that advocates the mastery of different linguistic functions and concepts normally involving agreement, apology, and requirement [16]. Last but not least, a situational syllabus delicately exerts multiple functions under the specific circumstance of discourse, which promotes language use against contextual and real-life settings [16].

The other three syllabuses, task-based syllabus, process syllabus, and content-based syllabus, are of the analytical and process-oriented variety [5]. The task-

based syllabus contains a high degree of complexity and purpose since it aims to enhance learners' language-related skills through conducting diverse well-organized tasks, while process syllabuses emphasize the process of language acquisition and the agency of students rather than the specific features of the language itself. Being prominently prevailing in America where there is a considerable host of English language learners in different majors and levels [12], content-based syllabus (CBS) primarily targets at imparting the necessary and essential language knowledge to students with sufficient content materials [16]. This kind of syllabus also emphasizes more on obtaining disciplinary knowledge, rendering it incidental and optional to improve language skills and language proficiency [5]. More significantly, coherence and logic are remarkably highlighted in the process of choosing or developing the materials to be the content of CBS [12].

2 INTRODUCTION OF ENGLISH AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION (EMI) IN ENGLISH TEACHING

With the accelerating trend of globalization and other technological alteration, EMI is adopted more and more frequently nowadays, aiming at transferring academic disciplinary knowledge, such as history, architecture, and mathematics, via English in non-native environments [10]. Jiang and Zhang assert unequivocally that EMI is rapidly gaining influence in English teaching

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contexts in China, particularly those involving professional instruction because EMI is conceived as the primary vehicle for delivering knowledge [13]. It is also effective in enhancing students' performance in acquiring non-linguistic recognition and in fostering students' foreign language capability as a by-product, which demonstrates its diploid functions. Jiang and Zhang further highlighted that EMI features prominently for its high effectiveness as it lessens barriers that non-native speakers encounter when learning a foreign language to a large degree [13].

In particular, Barnard mentions several vital significances of publicizing EMI in higher education [3]. Firstly, it serves practical functions for indigenous learners by enabling them to catch up with the civilization and culture which are intensified by globalization and chiefly spread in English. Additionally, EMI approach can also be advantageous for international students since they can be endowed with opportunities to engage in diverse teaching and learning modes, which further fundamentally strengthens the cultural and pedagogical exchanges between different nations. Lastly, the EMI schemes can substantially generate income for universities by launching diverse programs targeting at international students. This enables universities to make tangible profits and thus provide stable financial supports for the advancement of both teaching and research in the long term. With the relevant theoretical statement clarified, the following section will focus on the way in which the combination of CBS and EMI can eminently match the chosen context.

3 DISCUSSION

The law faculty of a university in mainland China will be chosen as the contextual setting appertaining to this study, with postgraduates being the participants. Their English proficiency is approximately B2, so they are required to attend compulsory courses in international law and legal English, which will last for 36 weeks in an aca-demic year. In reference to the personnel training programs (PTPs), which are based on the needs analysis and context analysis conducted prior to commencing the teaching activities, students and teachers all place a prominent value on the following anticipated requirements and outcomes:

Grasping international law expertise and drafting international law contracts by gaining knowledge from technical textbooks composed in English.

Making oral comments in English about disputes and conflicts of international law.

Mastering communicative skills that will soon be employed in international companies to ensure efficient and accurate negotiation with foreign litigant participants.

Developing the necessary legal English proficiency in order to pass the National Judicial Bar in mainstream English-speaking countries.

Based on the definition of EMI previously introduced, it deviates from the conventional language education and the disciplinary teaching in universities of main-land China [12], as it essentially prioritizes subject knowledge

over linguistic enhancement, which is radically distinctive from the traditional English teaching modes [1]. Hence, the combined approach of EMI and CBS is considered the most appropriate teaching methodology, which not only equips students with abundant content of diverse disciplinary domains but also accentuates the development of students' foreign language acquisition [6].

Under this circumstance, this linked pedagogical method of CBS and EMI effectively aligns with the contextual conditions and learners' requirements, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. First of all, both EMI and CBS emphasize integrating language teaching with subject teaching [9]. Apparently, the adoption of CBS can practically prepare the appropriate teaching materials with the assistance of EMI conveying the concrete contents through English. Furthermore, Jiang and Zhang conduct a study in a Chinese medical university, claiming that the effectiveness of certain courses can be guaranteed by setting an English proficiency criterion of 6.5 in the IELTS test for sophomores to participate in the immersed EMI program [13]. In this context, the majority of admitted postgraduates scored over 80 out of 100 in the English test in China's postgraduate entrance exam, which is equivalent to IELTS 6.5 band. This indicated that they are sufficiently competent to en-gage in courses taught in English, and their abundant level of English proficiency enables them to make a genuine commitment to digest and explore content knowledge rather than sparing main effort in comprehending English. Last but not least, CBS is essentially helpful in increasing learners' autonomy. According to Jalilzadeh and Tahmasebi, CBS is a learner-centered mode to arouse students' learning incentive and innovation; at the same time, it is also conducive to fostering students' development of analytical, logical, and critical thinking [9]. It has also been exemplified in a case study conducted by Liaw that students from a variety of backgrounds can benefit from CBS. For instance, it can noticeably enhance students' critically thinking according to the illustrated statistics and stimulate their certain autonomy for immersed class participation, such as making remarks on the teaching materials and accomplishing assignments with open-ended questions. Along with that, post-graduates learning international law and legal English are strongly encouraged to spontaneously deliver critical speeches and come up with innovative ideas to deepen their interpretation of the taught content and to promote their English competence evidently. To be specific, under the planning scheme of CBS, teachers can arrange group or individual workshops, reporting, seminars, and presentations every week, which paves the way for facilitating students' self-directedness [13]. In summary, CBS is of a high degree of feasibility and practicality in the aforementioned teaching context.

However, an inescapable issue that needs addressing is why a task-based syllabus cannot be a substitution in such a teaching context. It is stated in the research of Barron that the ultimate purpose of a task-based syllabus is to acquire the target language, though it solves certain

practical problems on occasion. Furthermore, it is also widely acknowledged that language is placed high on the agenda in designing and conducting task-based syllabus [11]. Judging from that, this is in opposition to the primary element of a content-based syllabus, which emphasizes teachers' instruction on disciplinary knowledge and subject information [16]. As a consequence, a task-based syllabus apparently appears to be inappropriate in the educational context discussed above.

Concerning the practical implementation of CBS, several recommendations can be provided. For one thing, in-depth needs analysis as well as constraint analysis are equally important throughout the whole teaching process. Such analysis not only elicits students' authentic demands by proposing lucid teaching objectives [17], but it can also be considered a compelling instrument for identifying the linguistic discourse or learning environment that students will engage in [19]. Sequentially, the analysis also plays a fundamental role in designing an appropriate syllabus and curriculum with proper quantity and difficulty index [7]. In the process, teachers can be reminded to adjust their teaching pace, amend teaching content, and modify teaching materials at any time. Another significant recommendation would be to enrich the teaching content by introducing course-relevant resources and abundant audiovisual presentations such as news reports and documentaries, thereby encouraging students to consolidate the taught knowledge [13]. Apart from that, assessments and surveys can equally exert a positive impact on the outcomes of teaching and studying. To illustrate, creative speeches and mock trials can be used to testify to students' mastery of law while exercising their capacity to produce English output. Tsou and Kao illustrate that participating in such an in-person demonstration enables students to ameliorate and develop their English acquisition and proficiency to a larger extent [20]. Most importantly, teachers' capability of professional expertise and English proficiency are determinately significant in a CBS-based classroom. In light of this, teacher education relevant to CBS and EMI technical training can be indispensable to nurture their sensitivity to perceive students' learning process. It is worth mentioning that Tsou and Kao proposed that various categories of assessments initially designed for students can also be a benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of teacher education, thereby strengthening teachers' competence in education.

To conclude, these three abovementioned strategies will exert a direct, beneficial, and fruitful impact on the performance of the program, including allowing for greater students' autonomy regarding the design of assignments and assessments, expanding access to diverse resources [13], and facilitating practitioners' competence through the provision of professional training.

4 CONCLUSION

After evaluating several types of syllabuses, this study intends to clarify the favorable influence of CBS in the above-mentioned teaching context in a Chinese university with participants specialized in international law. The study illustrates that CBS can be a powerful instrument for equipping learners with a thorough understanding of international law, enhancing their English proficiency, and, more importantly, nurturing sophisticated thinking skills that are essential in academic performance. In general, this study provides crucial insights into the anticipated outcome of combining CBS and EMI in non-language subject classes, which also provides theoretical supports and pedagogical practice with regard to the integration of CBS with EMI, English for academic purposes (EAP), and English for specific purposes (ESP) in different contexts.

Finally, potential challenges and various limitations should be clearly identified. Firstly, merely based on personal argument and observation, the specific effectiveness of CBS fails to be quantified due to the lack of the corresponding experiments. Thus, a rigorous case study needs to be carried out employing qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-mode research methodologies in order to produce accurate and convincing data. Secondly, due to the limited word counts, this paper has not involved combining effects and outcomes of CBS with alternative English teaching approaches including EAP and ESP. Therefore, future studies are required to investigate whether these approaches harbor a similar capacity or function to achieve the anticipated results. The other weakness that cannot be ignored is its failure to explore whether the estimated teaching objectives and effects can be achieved by other types of syllabuses. To address this issue, further research is strongly recommended to study those syllabuses in comparison with CBS.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Under the professional guidance of Professor Ho at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the first author Chunxiao Yue is in charge of conceiving the general framework, collecting materials, and accomplishing the abstract and discussion parts of this paper. The second author Xiangyu Cui completed the parts of the literature review, introduction of EMI, as well as conclusion while providing necessary proofreading for the paper.

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