The field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) abounds with a veritable “alphabet soup” of acronyms: English language teaching (ELT), English-language learners (ELLs), English for general purposes (EGP), English for academic purposes (EAP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and content-based instruction (CBI), to name just a few. ESP is particularly rich in acronyms that describe its various subdisciplines: English for science and technology (EST), English for business and economics (EBE), English for legal purposes (ELP), English for medical purposes (EMP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), and so on.

Confusion and Boundary Disputes: EAP? CBI? ESP?

It is understandable that those who first enter the field of applied linguistics may feel lost in this alphabet soup. And those of us who teach courses in TESOL methodology spend a considerable amount of time explicating the meanings of acronyms such as English as a foreign language (EFL), English as a second language (ESL), English as an additional language (EAL), and the like. However, even more weathered veterans of the field may pause to ponder the differences between the closely related “cousins” ESP, EAP, and CBI and ask “Where are the boundaries?” As we will see in this entry, this confusion relates to the tendency of ESP and CBI to encroach upon each other’s territories. The confusion engendered as a result is made all the more marked by competing claims in the literature about where the boundaries between these two territories lie. To begin resolving the dispute, let’s first look at several instructional scenarios:

1. At Lakeridge Elementary School, teacher Tarry Lindquist uses social studies as a core of her fifth grade classroom, integrating aspects of science, reading, language arts, and art into the core curriculum. For example, at the beginning of the school year, students read legends and stories about First Americans (language arts), studied hunters and gatherers and the land bridge theory (social studies), learned about stewards of the earth (science), and made block prints and stencils with Northwest Indian designs (art) (Lindquist, 1995).

2. At UCLA, undergraduate students in a multi-skills ESL class taught by lecturer Linda Jensen studied a unit about the First Amendment of the US Constitution. In this unit, they viewed video footage of authentic university lectures from a communications studies course and read related excerpts from the course text as well as other related articles. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities centered on the topic of First Amendment rights (e.g., dress codes, speech codes on campus). All language and skills instruction used this context as a point of departure (Weigle & Jensen, 1997).

3. Based on a needs analysis of final year projects for engineering students at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, lecturer Lynne Flowerdew targeted the development of students’ critical thinking skills. Identifying the genre of problem solution as
critical to students’ ability to complete this project, she obtained samples from the Engineering Department, analyzing the constituent elements of these final projects. Students in the ESL course were instructed to work in groups to identify a project focus; they then received instruction in the genre of the problem solution report. Drafts of these reports received instructor feedback. Students were also required to double-check the feasibility of their solutions with a subject specialist (Flowerdew, 2000).

4. In the intensive English program (IEP) of Indiana University, students in Joy Egbert’s elective class “Kids and Computers” engaged in an exchange with second and third grade children at a local elementary school. For the first step in the exchange, the IEP students created computer-based slide shows about their culture. They then began a series of school visits, the aim of which was to teach the children computer skills and to collaboratively produce slide shows. To reflect on what they learned during the process, Egbert’s students participated in electronic journal exchanges with the instructor (Egbert, 2000).

5. At the Colchester English Study Centre, Joan Allwright conducted a short course for visiting medical professionals with the aim of improving their English for professional discourse purposes. To better analyze needs, participants were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire identifying areas of need in their communication skills. Participants were then asked to participate in case conference simulations (based on real medical cases). Following the simulations, the teacher shared actual clinical solutions to the cases and provided feedback on language (Allwright & Allwright, 1977).

6. In Mrs. Macias’s sheltered section of ninth grade English, there were 25 students from different countries. The sheltered course followed the regular English 9 syllabus but enrolled only non-native English speakers. In the course, students read well-known short stories in English and an abridged version of the novel *Great Expectations*. In the sheltered section, the teacher included additional vocabulary exercises and provided students with extra study questions. She also lectured more than in her regular English 9 class (Adamson, 1993).

At first glance, most would agree that scenarios 1, 2, 4, and 6 above represent examples of CBI in action, while scenarios 3 and 5 represent rather clear-cut examples of ESP. However, identifying instances of CBI or ESP and articulating the differences between them is quite another thing. In the section that follows, we will look at historical attempts to chart the boundaries of ESP and revisit the scenarios.

**Mapping the Territory: ESP**

Over the years, numerous attempts have been made to “map” the territory of ESP (Strevens, 1977; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Johns, 1991; Jordan, 1997; Johns & Price-Machado, 2001). Two of the most commonly referred to maps in the ESP literature are those proposed by Strevens and Hutchinson and Waters (see Figures 1 and 2).

Although differing in the boundaries they draw, these maps tend to exhibit some overlap regarding the following aspects of the territory that they chart as ESP. First, ESP is seen as distinct from EGP, which in the tree diagrams these experts draw is represented as a separate branch of ELT. Second, there tends to be a sharp division drawn between occupational or vocational ESP and the varieties of special purpose language instruction that occur within academic institutions. Finally, EAP is often singled out as distinct from its other more specific academic counterparts, such as EST.
Figure 1  Types of ESP (Strevens, P. [1977] Special-purpose language learning. Language Teaching and Linguistics Abstracts, 10[3], 145–63 © Cambridge University Press)

Figure 2  The tree of ELT (Hutchinson, T., & Waters, A. [1987] © Cambridge University Press)
Early work on CBI (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; see also Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003) identified the following three prototype models of CBI (see Figure 3):

1. **Theme-based instruction.** Themes of specific interest, relevance, or both to the learner provide the organizing principle for the course. The theme of each unit serves to contextualize new language that is presented and provides the point of departure for skill- and language-based instruction and practice. Typically, a theme extends over several days or even weeks, providing rich linguistic input and creating the necessary conditions for learners to acquire new language.

2. **Sheltered instruction.** Students for whom the language of instruction is a second or additional language (L2) are separated or “sheltered” from their first language (L1) (i.e., mainstream) peers for the purpose of content area instruction. In most versions of this model, the content instructors who teach the sheltered section of the course receive specialized training in techniques to help students access the content material and to provide a nurturing atmosphere for the learning of both language and content. In theory, students’ exposure to the rich academic language and complex concepts presented in the sheltered class provides the necessary conditions for L2 acquisition to occur.

3. **Adjunct instruction.** One or more content area course is paired with a language course. At the outset of the course, as well as on an ongoing basis, the instructors negotiate their syllabuses to coordinate their instructional objectives. Typically, the objectives of the language course are identified with respect to students’ linguistic needs in the content course, though adjustments in the content course objectives may also occur. L2 acquisition occurs (a) through students’ exposure to the academically challenging language of the content course and (b) through the systematic linguistic guidance provided in the language course.

In proposing these three models, the authors caution that they are intended as prototypes only, and as such are meant to allow “consideration of other content-based variations which combine features of the three” (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003, p. 23). Ostensibly, these authors foresee innovations in CBI models as combining features of the existing prototypes but differing in some significant way—that is, arising out of the varied instructional settings in which the model is to be implemented and the specific needs of the students in that setting.

In the intervening years since the initial publication of *Content-Based Second Language Instruction* in 1989, numerous innovations in CBI models have arrived on the scene. These innovations have been well documented in the CBI literature. Figure 4 presents an updated map of CBI, as proposed by Brinton (2007). As represented in this diagram, the three original prototype models continue to flourish. However, they have continued to adapt to
the settings in which they are used, causing the creation of several subbranches and even other new “hybrids.”

Note that detailed information on the recent models depicted in Figure 4 are contained in the following sources: simulated adjunct (Brinton & Jensen, 2002); sustained content (Pally, 1997, 2000; Murphy & Stoller, 2001); and modified theme-based (Stoller, 2002).

**Boundary Parameters: ESP and CBI**

The early 1990s witnessed a great deal of discussion of both the common ground shared by ESP and CBI and their essential differences. Agreed-upon similarities include the following (Johns, 1992, 1997; Brinton, 1993):

1. ESP and CBI share a dissatisfaction with the traditional abstraction of language from its natural environment and real language use.
2. They share a concern that general purpose English courses cannot prepare students for the demanding linguistic, rhetorical, and contextual challenges of the real world.
3. They use genuine discourse from the real world to ensure that classroom content reflects the target situation.
4. They engage students in meaningful use of language rather than in activities that focus on the language itself.
5. They expand the definition of language teaching to include cognitive skills and critical thinking.
6. Finally, both ESP and CBI have as their goal the transfer of language skills and content to real life.

The differences of opinion regarding the territory covered by ESP and CBI, however, tend to loom larger. In an article originally published in 1992 and subsequently republished in 1997, Johns makes the following claims:

1. ESP has a rich research tradition, unlike CBI, its younger cousin.
2. It serves adult language learners internationally, while CBI is anchored in the English-speaking world and is linked to K-12 settings.
3. ESP courses often focus on one skill, while CBI courses favor an integrated, all-skills focus.
4. ESP is grounded in linguistically oriented and text-based research, while CBI research is concerned with the immediate classroom and issues of pedagogy (e.g., student affect, materials/curriculum design, and instructional strategies).

Disagreeing with these claims by Johns, Brinton (1993) responds as follows:

1. Both CBI and ESP are international in scope, as witness presentations on CBI programs from all over the globe at the international TESOL Conference.
2. Both CBI and ESP share a research base, as witness ongoing research in sheltered classrooms on the discourse of teachers and learners.
3. ESP grew out of commercial ventures, and even today often displays a commercial bent; CBI, on the other hand, grew out of academic needs and remains firmly entrenched in academic institutions.
4. ESP populations are brought together in the common pursuit of expanded language proficiency in a given domain and are thus identifiable; CBI populations are more varied, but are brought together through the vehicle of content.
5. Learners in ESP courses are instrumentally motivated since what they are learning is pragmatically informed (i.e., with immediate value to their profession or discipline); CBI learners are more intrinsically motivated, that is, by knowledge as an avenue to success in more general terms.
6. ESP is field-specific; CBI consists of a broad-based inquiry into academic knowledge, with a particular topic chosen not as an object, but as a vehicle of study.

**CBI’s Role in ESP: Putting a New Spin on the Debate**

Though the above discussions are of some historical interest, they tend to focus almost exclusively on delineating the boundaries between CBI and ESP and do not lead to any satisfactory conclusion. In fact, as insinuated in the title of this entry, the more pertinent issue may lie instead in determining the place of CBI in ESP.

Eskey (1997) puts a new spin on the issue by eschewing the debate about boundaries and instead focusing on CBI’s role as a course-organizing principle:

> the content-based syllabus is best viewed as an even newer attempt to extend and develop our conception of what a syllabus for a second-language course should comprise, including a concern with language form and language function, as well as a crucial third dimension—the factual and conceptual content of such courses. (p. 135)

Having now established that CBI is a type of syllabus, we are in a better position to pinpoint its relation to ESP. Master (1997/8) concurs with Eskey, noting that CBI has the same status as the grammatical, notional/functional, situational, rhetorical, and task-based syllabi. Further, he argues, in terms of Wilkins’s (1976) distinction between synthetic and analytic syllabi, CBI constitutes an analytic syllabus, since “significant linguistic forms can be isolated from the . . . context in which they occur [and] learning can be focussed on important aspects of the language structure” (p. 2). ESP, on the other hand, is simply one of two main divisions of ELT, the other being EGP (i.e., as previously pointed out by Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). According to Master, a CBI syllabus can be used in both EGP courses (in which case the theme-based model would pertain) and in ESP courses (in which case either the sheltered, adjunct, or other hybrid models would pertain). He concludes by noting that ESP is simply a domain of ELT that makes substantial use of the CBI syllabus.
Continuing the argument in much the same vein, Master and Brinton (1998) note:

In our view, CBI is a type of syllabus, the organizing principle on which a curriculum is based. It joins the other types of syllabi recognized in the field, namely, the grammatical, the notional-functional, the rhetorical and the task-based syllabus. The organizing principle is the content or subject matter on which any implementation of CBI . . . is based. ESP, on the other hand, is a division of ELT that has only one other member, namely, English for general purposes (EGP). ESP makes extensive use of the content-based and the task-based . . . syllabi. In other words, there is no “boundary” between ESP and CBI; instead, they operate independently because both ESP and EGP may make use of any of the syllabi. (pp. vii–viii)

Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) and Jordan (1997) examine the range of approaches that can be used in EAP syllabus design, tracing these by era. They note that while early EAP syllabi tended to be influenced by the lexicogrammar-based approach, syllabi in the 1970s were typically based on notional/functional or discourse-based approaches. Similarly, syllabi in the 1980s were frequently organized using either the skills-based or genre-based approach. These authors conclude their analysis by noting that a very influential approach to EAP syllabus design, especially in North America, is the content-based syllabus.

Finally, Basturkmen (2006) discusses the role of CBI in ESP courses, stating that ESP today makes extensive use of CBI. In passing, she notes several potential advantages of the CBI syllabus over alternative types of syllabi. These include the fact that CBI makes use of authentic texts embedded within the subject content, thus avoiding the pitfall of many other syllabus types, which remove or “export” the text from its natural context. Further, since CBI is an integrated, holistic approach, students are exposed to all skills and are required to synthesize from multiple sources.

Conclusions

To return to the scenarios presented earlier in this entry, we can now see that scenarios 3 and 5, both ESP courses, employ genre-based and discourse-based syllabi, respectively. The remaining scenarios (1, 2, 4, and 6) represent EAP courses that employ a CBI syllabus (i.e., a theme-based prototype in scenarios 1, 2, and 4 and the sheltered prototype in scenario 6).

This entry has examined the role of CBI in ESP. While early debates focused on delineating the boundaries between the two, later works more accurately analyze their symbiotic nature, stressing the role that a CBI syllabus plays in ESP course design. To conclude, CBI can not only be a highly effective way of delivering EGP courses but can serve as an equally efficient organizing principle for EAP and ESP courses (Brinton & Holten, 2001). Ultimately, an ESP course developer may choose to use a CBI syllabus as an organizing principle; she or he may also select another syllabus type (e.g., grammatical, notional/functional, genre-based, or task-based).

SEE ALSO: English for Academic Purposes; English for Occupational Purposes; English for Science and Technology; Language for Specific Purposes: Overview

References


**Suggested Readings**


