What Do VESL and Content-Based Instruction Have in Common?

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Vocational English as a second language (VESL) has, in general, been defined as English language instruction that concentrates on the linguistic and cultural competencies requisite for employment. If we assume the definition of content-based instruction to be "the integration of particular content with language-teaching aims" (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989, p. 2), then the connection between the two should be obvious. In fact, VESL serves as an excellent example of content-based instruction.

Basically, there are three types of VESL instruction: (a) general VESL, (b) occupational-cluster VESL, and c) occupation-specific VESL.

General VESL refers to language instruction related to finding a job, maintaining a job, and advancing on the career ladder. Known also as prevocational ESL, it is content-based language instruction in so far as it focuses on teaching English in the context of employment. General VESL courses normally introduce language—communicative skills, grammatical structures, vocabulary—and cultural information, all relating to the world of work. For the most part, students enrolling in general VESL have an array of occupational interests. The unifying element is that all of the students seek general work-related language and content. A typical class covers such topics as reading and interpreting want ads, filling out job applications, answering questions for job interviews, and reading and interpreting transportation and schedule information. Other topics might include understanding and giving directions, clarifying information, making excuses, and apologizing.

Developing cultural competency in a general VESL course is as important as developing linguistic competency. Instructors must provide students with pertinent information regarding the workplace culture as an integral component of instruction. The possible areas covered in teaching cultural competency include understanding work schedules, time sheets, paychecks and deductions, benefits, employee forms, safety rules, and unions. This cultural information is taught

through discussions or readings in English and followed up with other language activities for reinforcement. It may also be communicated in the students' native language when concepts are too complicated to be explained in English at the particular ESL level being taught. These types of cultural notes may also be presented in written form for students who are literate in their first language, as they are in the VESL textbook, *English That Works* (Savage, How, & Yeung, 1982).

The second model of VESL instruction, *occupational-cluster VESL,* provides instruction for a group of occupations that are bound together by common language needs, technical skills, and work culture. VESL for health workers, VESL for restaurant workers, VESL for service workers all fit into this category of occupational-cluster VESL. As an example, VESL for service workers may cover linguistic competencies and cultural competencies relevant to work in stores, restaurants, hotels, gas stations, and repair shops (see, for instance, Wrigley, 1987). A course such as this one aims for students to gain mastery in communicative language skills, reading and writing skills, grammatical structures, and terminology that are basic to survival in all service work. In addressing cultural competence, the instructor would also teach content, including job interviewing, job performance, on-the-job expectations, customer relations, employee evaluations, and critical thinking for the workplace, all specific to service work.

The primary objective of the third type of VESL instruction, *occupation-specific VESL,* is to develop linguistic and cultural competence in a specific occupation. Occupation-specific VESL enables students to enter or continue in a vocational training program, find employment, and function on a job. The linguistic and cultural competencies parallel what is taught in occupational-cluster VESL. However, the focus is much narrower, such as VESL for janitorial workers or VESL for electronics workers.

VESL bridge classes, such as those offered at City College of San Francisco, are a variation of this occupation-specific model. These bridge classes were instituted primarily because limited English proficient (LEP) students were not succeeding in mainstream vocational courses and programs, even though they had reached the recommended ESL level for entry into such courses. Bridge classes involve the application of various ESL instructional techniques to teach a specific vocational skill. Although communicative language skills, certain grammatical structures, and vocabulary are taught, the instruction emphasizes gaining proficiency in the content (i.e., vocational skill). VESL bridge instruction employs many of the techniques typically used in sheltered content instruction. In order for students to gain competency, the instructor incorporates oral, aural, and visual ESL teaching strategies to teach the content. Students are asked to repeat information and answer as in a choral language activity, and the instructor solicits constant verbal feedback from students to check their comprehension of the content. Because of the teaching techniques involved, VESL bridges have historically been taught by ESL instructors who are also competent in the vocational skill, such as use of the computer and computer applications or typing. Ideally, vocational instructors should receive training in ESL teaching methodology, especially when teaching sheltered content sections in which LEP students are taught in a homogeous grouping.

VESL instruction arose out of the need for LEP adults to become employed. This targeted population has found it difficult to succeed in traditional vocational training programs and, moreover, to find actual employment because of limited language skills and cultural knowledge critical for job success. General VESL, occupational-cluster VESL, and occupation-specific VESL have all evolved as instructional models to answer the content-specific language needs of this LEP population.

In order to understand VESL as it relates to content-based language instruction, it is important to examine the delivery systems (the settings) through which VESL instruction is currently being offered. The four types of delivery systems include: (a) the ESL program approach, (b) the vocational program approach, (c) the work experience approach, and (d) the workplace approach.

In the *ESL program approach,* courses are offered in general VESL, occupational-cluster VESL, and occupation-specific VESL. These courses may or may not have direct links to vocational training programs, in the sense that they directly relate to the content covered in existing vocational courses. Their development is often a precursor to the implementation of the other approaches that will be discussed below and comes from the sheer numbers of requests by students to institute such courses because they cannot enter existing vocational programs or because they cannot find employment due to their limited language proficiency. General ESL classes may also include VESL units on employment, emphasizing work-related language and cultural competencies.

The *vocational program approach* usually prepares LEP students for entry-level positions in a particular field of work, such as office occupations. It is essential that along with vocational training, students receive VESL instruction of the general VESL, occupational-cluster, or occupation-specific type. For the most part, VESL in this setting usually focuses on language and cultural competencies specific to the occupation or occupational cluster. Instructional materials used in the VESL component are based on content in the designated occupation(s). The vocational instructor and VESL instructor work closely together so that there is continuity between their respective courses. Drawing from the materials and language used in the content class, the VESL instructor is, thus, able to develop language activities

that facilitate the students' assimilation of the content as well as further develop their language skills. In addition, it is important for the vocational instructor to obtain feedback from the VESL instructor as to what adjustments must be made in teaching content and skills to LEP students, especially if the vocational course is taught as a sheltered class of all LEP students as opposed to a class combining both LEP and native learners.

The third delivery system for VESL is the *work experience approach*. In this approach, a student is placed at a work site for on-the-job experience, in addition to receiving VESL and vocational instruction in the classroom. As with the vocational program approach, general VESL, occupational-cluster VESL, or occupation-specific VESL are the types of VESL instruction implemented. However, what makes this approach unique is that VESL and vocational instruction can be directly applied to a real work situation and vice versa. Hence, VESL instructors can draw upon actual experiences on the job to structure classroom activities. Moreover, students are introduced to experiential language learning via their direct immersion into the working world. This kind of exposure allows them to build communicative language skills in a natural setting with native speakers as well as gain pertinent occupational and cultural knowledge.

The last approach which incorporates VESL instruction into its design is the *workplace approach*. This system of delivery provides VESL instruction (occupational-cluster or occupation-specific) to LEP employees already on the job. The purpose of VESL instruction in this setting is to facilitate the adjustment that LEP employees must make in an English-speaking work environment. The intended outcome is that they, in turn, will become more productive workers. (See the article by Henze & Katz in this volume for further discussion of issues in workplace literacy.)

VESL shares many of the same concerns as other content-based language instructional models. As far as staff development is concerned, there needs to be training for vocational instructors in how to better accommodate LEP students and for VESL instructors in strategies for working with vocational instructors on content course development. Content information and materials need to be gathered from both vocational instructors and industry to develop appropriate VESL curriculum and materials. VESL instructors, like other content-based language instructors, must insure that language instruction relates to language in the content course (i.e., vocational training or the workplace). A third concern is the need for administrators and industry (as in the examples of the work experience approach and workplace approach) to support VESL. Without such support, this type of instruction will never have the opportunity to develop. This development brings to mind the last concern—the financing for such programs. In this age of budget cuts and fiscal restraint, those of us in the field need to seek out creative opportunities for collaborative efforts between not only education and private industry, but also ESL and vocational programs within our own institutions.

The purpose of this article has been to examine VESL as an example of content-based language instruction. In explaining the types of VESL instruction, the intention has been to illustrate how language and content teaching mesh. It was also explained how VESL delivery systems can, in fact, supplement content-based language instruction. Finally, the common concerns that VESL holds with other models of content-based language instruction were discussed. It is hoped that readers of the Exchange have gained a better understanding of VESL and its individual approach to content-based instruction. ▧

References

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