



“Do They Want the Same Thing?” Learner Perspectives on Two Content-Based Course Designs in the Context of English as a Foreign Language

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Bio Data

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Abstract

The notion of content-based instruction (CBI) has been widely applied to English as a second language (ESL) classrooms with satisfactory learning outcomes in the last two decades. Although it has been intensively explored in the field of applied linguistics, the empirical research provides only indirect implications for CBI curriculum development (Stoller, 2004). By definition, CBI has a dual commitment to both language- and content-learning objectives. Therefore, most courses offered at the tertiary level in Taiwan, either in English departments or with English instruction, are content-based in nature because content knowledge and language proficiency are highly required elements in such an academic setting. To add to current CBI literature perspectives on English as a foreign language (EFL), this research presented two models of content-based courses, one content-driven and the other language-driven, with a

questionnaire to elicit English majors’ opinions on the two course designs. The results showed that they preferred the language-driven course and that they aspired for more language-skills training. It is therefore argued that there are differences in student beliefs concerning their needs and expectations between the EFL and ESL settings.

Key Words: content-based instruction, student attitude, course design, English as a foreign language, higher education in Taiwan

Introduction

Content-based language teaching is seen as a curriculum design that can lead to positive gains in the learners of a second or foreign language. A number of case studies support the idea that content-based instruction (CBI) is beneficial (Stoller, 2004; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Heo (2006) emphasizes that the most important point about CBI is that “CBI is believed to better reflect learners’ needs in terms of preparation for academic courses and helps the learners access the content of academic learning” (p. 30).

CBI can be seen as having weak and strong forms. Specifically, Stoller (2004) writes:

[. . .] At one end of the continuum are “content-driven” approaches with strong commitments to content-learning objectives (immersion, partial immersion, sheltered subject-area courses); at the other end of the continuum are “language driven” approaches with strong commitments to language learning objectives, using content mainly as a springboard for language practice. (p. 268)

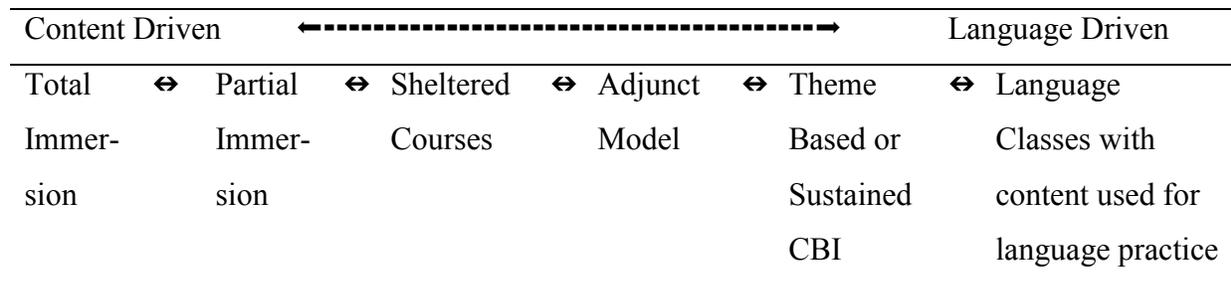


Figure 1 Courses along the content-based instruction continuum

Continuum adapted from Met (1998, p. 41; 1999, p. 7) and Stoller (2004)

However, even though Stoller (2004) states that CBI has attracted global attention, the common goal of the models she reviewed was to bridge the gap between English as a second language (ESL) classes and regular academic work in English. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, where no native speaker models are available, and little cultural input occurs

outside class, CBI is seen to be less effective (Heo, 2006; Pally, 1999; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). In addition, there is recognition that there can be a "sudden jump" (Bragger & Rice, 1999, as cited in Stoller, 2004, p. 266) in difficulty when foreign language students move from language instruction to literature classes or other academic topics taught in a foreign language. Therefore, it should not be assumed that transferring the design of a CBI course that is effective in an ESL setting to an EFL setting will result in a course that is equally effective.

Theme-Based Model

A popular implementation of CBI in EFL settings is through theme-based courses. According to Duenas (2004), theme-based courses are the most commonly used model in CBI. Theme-based courses "have explicit language aims which are usually more important than the content learning objectives" (p. 4). Thus, "[theme-based] courses would constitute the weakest representation of CBI models" (p. 4).

Kavaliauskiene (2004) conducted research in Lithuania to show that the integration of content-based instruction into the ESP classroom results in a positive difference in promoting learner autonomy as well as progress in vocabulary, writing, making presentations, and project work. Kavaliauskiene cites Rivers (1992, p. 41) in concluding that this research supports four major empirical research findings that emphasize the benefits of CBI: (1) thematically organized materials are easier to learn and remember; (2) coherent and meaningful information is deeper and better processed; (3) the common outcome of CBI is a link between learner motivation and interest; (4) developing expertise in a topic through a sequence of complex tasks.

Sheltered Model

Another CBI model is one of combining content and language into one course, which would make the course more akin to sheltered subject-matter instruction. Duenas (2004) notes that "the overall purpose of [sheltered] courses is content learning rather than language learning, so this model constitutes one of the 'strong' paradigms within the general framework of CBI" (p. 6). Sheltered models are more often used with advanced students. However, the readiness of EFL students to participate in a sheltered class where instruction is primarily in the target language (L2) is a concern, given their presumed lower proficiency.

Chapple (1998) researched the readiness of students in Hong Kong through a sheltered

course on film, with English as the medium of instruction. She notes that student responses on an end-of-course evaluation were quite positive with regard to content knowledge and language proficiency gains, as well as the sheer enjoyment of the course, which is in line with previous findings on CBI in that it leads to “successful subject matter learning, [. . .] language development superior to that achieved otherwise in school or academia, and positive attitude changes” (Wesche & Skehan, 2002, p. 225). Chapple and Curtis (2000) do acknowledge that the small-scale study does not provide any conclusive evidence for language learning, and cite Wesche's (1993) assertion that “more longitudinal studies of content-based approaches would elucidate the appropriateness of these models for EFL teaching, particularly in Asian contexts” (p. 430).

Criticisms of CBI

A criticism of CBI by Master (2003) is that “the efficacy of sustained CBI” is supported “with (barring one or two exceptions) little other than anecdotal proof” (p. 427). Stoller (2004) concurs, indicating that “additional empirical research on content-based instruction is needed” (p. 275).

Though an advocate of CBI, Dickey (2004) offered a cautious view of CBI due to the potential for cognitive imbalance, acknowledging the possibility and danger of cognitive overload, which occurs when either (or both) the language intensity or content intensity is too difficult. The opposite extreme may also occur, where the language or content intensity may be too minimal, resulting in boredom. Thus, the challenge is to determine the root causes of cognitive overload or under-load. Yet, to identify the heart of the problem may be difficult, according to Stoller (2004), who cites Short (1999) and Gottlieb (1999) in acknowledging the difficulty of determining and identifying “if students are unable to demonstrate knowledge because of a language barrier or because of a lack of understanding of content material” (p. 275-76).

Wesche and Skehan (2002) also list other obstacles to successful implementation of a CBI curriculum as: a lack of teacher preparation, inadequate curricular definitions to integrate content and language objectives, a mismatch between course demands and language proficiency leading to frustration and loss of motivation, unrealistic expectations, inappropriate assessment methods, lack of administrative support, and the need for cross disciplinary cooperation.

Even taking the criticisms of CBI into account, the overall positive reports from previous case studies in CBI seem to show clearly that students can benefit from course designs that place greater emphasis on CBI, but what type of content-based instruction model would be most beneficial for students enrolled in the English department of a university in Taiwan?

Current Development of English Language Education in Taiwan

The challenge that students have in adapting to content-based instruction in a foreign language setting is especially pertinent in Taiwan. Although English is a foreign language in Taiwan, the students who reach the university level have had a depth of training and exposure to English that is far greater than American students of a foreign language like Russian or German. High school students are expected to develop a 7000-word vocabulary and be familiar with the full spectrum of grammatical patterns. Reading passages cover a variety of academic topics and can include literary topics as well (The Education Resource Center of Senior High School, 2007).

One caveat is that these expectations for English proficiency are not always met by graduating high school students who wish to continue studying at the university level. Students that score well enough to enter the prestigious national universities could well meet the expectations for high school graduates, but average students have vocabularies of less than 2000 English words (Chen, 1999, as cited in Lin, 2006). Given the wide variation in English proficiency among students entering universities in Taiwan, it is appropriate to profile the students and the English department that will be investigated in this research.

Profile of the English Department under research

The department targeted in this study was an English department at one of the top ranked national universities in Taiwan. The Department Chair stated that many students scored at the top of the first tier of students (Lai, 2008). Students can be characterized as having already reached the high-intermediate to advanced level upon entering the department.

First-year students are required to take 12 hours of language-training classes, including a two-semester oral training and listening course and a two-semester reading and composition course. Sophomore students are also required to take 12 hours of language training courses, which include a two-semester oral training and reading course and a two-semester reading and composition course.

In order to improve the proficiency level of students, the department has considered a number of plans to revise its language training curriculum. These potential revisions looked into greater incorporation of CBI.

New Content-Based Course Designs Proposed by the Department

One proposed course design (referred to hereafter as Design 1) can be characterized as a content-driven sheltered model. In this proposal, the language training program would be subsumed into the content courses. Students, given their high test scores, would be assumed to have the ability to competently participate in classes conducted completely in English. Further gains in their English proficiency would result from daily exposure to English in their lectures and readings and the need to use English productively during class discussions and when completing written homework assignments. The authentic input and output could be supplemented by some direct focus on form if needed. This is a strong version of CBI in which the focus is on teaching content and students are expected to improve through exposure to language used in a natural setting. In this model, courses would be similar to English departments in native English speaking countries where students are assumed to have adequate proficiency in English allowing them to focus directly on content mastery.

Another proposal for curriculum change would be more in line with a language-driven theme-based or sustained content-based instruction model (referred to hereafter as Design 2). In this model, students would enroll in writing and oral training classes that focused on one of the three fields offered by the department: literature, linguistics, or TESOL. These classes would still be designed to enhance the writing and speaking skills of students, but all topics for writing or discussion would revolve around the class's area of fields.

As these proposals raised some controversy among faculty, another issue to consider was how the students would react to major changes in the curriculum of this nature. Curriculum changes that have occurred in Asia are normally top-down processes that are the result of administrative decisions. Students may be consulted in terms of the topics that they are interested in for English language-training courses, but otherwise, they have little say in the development of a language-training curriculum.

What are Students' Perceptions?

Since a potentially major curriculum change was being considered, this was thought to be an optimal time to survey students to gather objective data on their opinions concerning the overall current language training program. This data could not be attained from the normal end of course surveys. Not only would this research focus on opinions about the current program, it would also provide insight on the students' beliefs about their own language-training needs and what their attitudes would be on moving from language training that had a stronger emphasis on skills development to a training program that was more strongly content-driven.

This could provide important information for the discussion on CBI since besides typical end-of-course evaluations and despite all the proclaimed and professed benefits of CBI, little research exists that examines student needs in a CBI setting. Valentine and Repath-Martos (1992) have undertaken research on student needs, with feedback revealing that “skills-based ESL courses in content areas of high general interest, in which instructors emphasize the relevance of materials and tasks, can do much to enhance student motivation and academic achievement” (p. 25).

The paper hopes to add to the literature on student attitudes toward CBI by focusing on their attitudes toward course designs that fall on either end of Met's continuum (Figure 1), a proposed theme-based course design and a proposed sheltered course design. Based on this background, the researchers focused on the following research questions for the study:

1. What are the English majors' attitudes and opinions toward a more content-driven curriculum versus the design of a more language-driven curriculum?
2. Why do they have these attitudes toward the two proposed curriculum designs?

Methodology

Informants

The English department required language-training classes for freshmen and sophomores. Students who were sophomores or above were targeted as the informants since they had completed or were close to completing both years of the courses. 96 English majors (or approximately 35% of the target population) participated in this study.

Instrument, Data Collection, and Analysis

The questions on the survey were designed in consultation with four experts and then piloted

twice to establish validity and reliability. The final questionnaire was distributed to students taking two sections of a required literature class during a class break. 96 completed questionnaires were returned. Key survey questions analyzed for this paper were:

1. Generally, do you feel the need to increase or decrease the frequency of using English in class?
2. Do you agree that the overall language training courses have equipped you well with the language skills you need for your future career or advanced study?
3. Do you feel that more *Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing* classes should be added or cut?
4. Has your proficiency been upgraded by taking language training classes?
5. Should these language training classes be made more challenging?
6. What score did you get in this language training class?
7. What is your future career plan?
8. If the department combines the skills classes with content classes and does not have separate skills classes, would you agree?
9. Different from the previous question, if the skills classes are kept and taught with topics of literature, linguistics, or TESOL, would you agree?

Questions 1 to 6 were to examine the informants' attitudes toward the current language training programs. Question 7 was used to understand the influence that their future plans would have on their attitudes toward the curriculum revision. Question 8 asked for the informants' attitudes toward the first course design, while question 9 queried their opinion toward the second proposal. In addition to these closed-ended questions, which used Likert scales to quantify student attitudes, the informants were also asked to provide any additional insights or opinions that they had on the two proposed course designs in questions 8 and 9. The closed-ended questions were analyzed by using SPSS. The comments from the open-ended question were coded using a system devised by the researchers.

Results of the Study

First, the students' attitudes toward the current language training program were examined. Second, their attitudes toward the proposals about course designs were investigated. Variation in the students' career intentions immediately after graduation was taken into consideration as well.

Students' Attitudes toward the Current Program

In order to better evaluate the attitudes of students toward the proposals for new curricula with a stronger content-driven focus, it was deemed necessary to first determine the students' attitudes toward the present language training program. In general, the students in the department were satisfied with the current language training programs, including all four language skills classes, although a significant minority of approximately one third (34.4%) of the students was dissatisfied with the classes. The dissatisfaction was mostly centered in a desire to enhance the difficulty levels of these classes, so that the classes could be more challenging. They also demanded more frequent English use in all classes; almost all students wanted to increase the number of hours of language-skills classes.

Students' Attitudes toward the New Course Designs

When the students were asked if they would like to eliminate all present language-training classes, they showed a strong tendency (1.26 on a 5-point Likert scale) to disagree with the idea. However, when surveyed about their attitudes toward the two proposed course designs, they seem to be more positive about the alternative idea of keeping language-skills courses but integrating content topics of literature, linguistics, or TESOL into them (Design 2: theme-based model) than to the idea of combining the skills and content classes and no longer having separate skills class (Design 1: sheltered model). Table 1 shows that the proposal for a theme-based model that fell on the language-driven end of the CBI continuum was favored.

Table 1 Students' Attitudes towards Proposed Designs

| Answer key | Design 1: Combine the skills and content classes (do not have separate skills classes) | | Design 2: Keep the skills classes and teach with literature, linguistics, or TESOL topics | |
|------------|--|------------|---|------------|
| | (Frequency) | Percentage | (Frequency) | Percentage |
| Disagree | (21) | 21.9 | (5) | 5.2 |
| Maybe not | (47) | 49.0 | (17) | 17.7 |
| No opinion | (7) | 7.3 | (20) | 20.8 |
| Maybe yes | (15) | 15.6 | (45) | 46.9 |
| Agree | (6) | 6.3 | (9) | 9.4 |
| Total | (96) | 100.0 | (96) | 100.0 |
| Mean* | | 2.4/5.0 | | 3.4/5.0 |

*5-point Likert scale

When asked about adopting Design 1 (sheltered/content-driven) in each language class separately, students showed much stronger disagreement than when queried about this concept in general. Table 2 shows that more than 80% of the students were against the proposal in spite of what language-skills class was being considered.

Table 2 Students' Attitudes toward Design 1 (Content-Driven Sheltered Model)

| Answer key | First-year Oral Training | | First-year Writing | | Second-year Oral Training | | Second-year Writing | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------|--------------------|---------|---------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|
| | (frequency) | (%) | (frequency) | (%) | (frequency) | (%) | (frequency) | (%) |
| Strongly disagree | (20) | 21.5 | (24) | 25.8 | (20) | 21.7 | (21) | 22.6 |
| Disagree | (21) | 22.6 | (21) | 22.6 | (18) | 19.6 | (23) | 24.7 |
| Modestly disagree | (39) | 41.9 | (3) | 33.3 | (38) | 41.3 | (34) | 36.6 |
| Modestly agree | (9) | 9.7 | (9) | 9.7 | (9) | 9.8 | (11) | 11.8 |
| Agree | (1) | 1.1 | (7) | 7.5 | (4) | 4.3 | (2) | 2.2 |
| Strongly agree | (3) | 3.2 | (1) | 1.1 | (3) | 3.3 | (2) | 2.2 |
| Total | (93) | 100.0 | (93) | 100.0 | (93) | 100.0 | (93) | 100.0 |
| Mean** | | 2.6/6.0 | | 2.5/6.0 | | 2.7/6.0 | | 2.5/6.0 |

**6-point Likert scale

As for Design 2 (theme-based/language-driven), the students showed no strong consensus when asked about each class separately. Table 3 displays the informants' strongest disagreement on the application of Design 2 into the second-year writing class. However, a calculation of the means for each question demonstrates no clear opinion for the first-year classes, but a slight agreement for turning second-year writing into a topic-based class. This result may show that EFL learners believe they need more time to develop writing abilities, compared to other skills.

Table 3 Students' Attitudes toward Design 2 (Language Driven Theme-Based Model)

| Answer key | First-year Oral Training | First-year Writing | Second-year Oral Training | Second-year Writing |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| | (frequency)% | (frequency)% | (frequency)% | (frequency)% |
| Strongly disagree | (7) 7.4 | (6) 6.5 | (10) 10.9 | (21) 22.6 |
| Disagree | (15) 16.0 | (15) 16.3 | (13) 14.1 | (23) 24.7 |
| Modestly disagree | (28) 29.8 | (25) 27.2 | (29) 31.5 | (34) 36.6 |
| Modestly agree | (19) 20.2 | (27) 29.3 | (21) 22.8 | (11) 11.8 |
| Agree | (21) 22.3 | (19) 20.7 | (16) 17.4 | (2) 2.2 |
| Strongly agree | (4) 4.3 | (0) 0.0 | (3) 3.3 | (2) 2.2 |
| Total | (94) 100.0 | (92) 100.0 | (92) 100.0 | (93) 100.0 |
| Mean** | 3.5/6.0 | 3.4/6.0 | 3.3/6.0 | 3.7/6.0 |

**6-point Likert scale

Attitudes of Students with Different Future Plans

In order to determine the effect of students' future plans on their responses to the curriculum change proposals, Table 4 provides some additional information about the future career aspirations of the students. Overall, almost 59% of the students indicated that they intend to go on to graduate school, although not necessarily in a field related to their undergraduate major.

Table 4 Survey of Students' Future Career Intentions

| Year at school | Future plans | | |
|----------------|----------------|------------|-------------|
| | Advanced Study | Employment | (Frequency) |
| Sophomores % | 75.0 | 25.0 | (24) |
| Juniors % | 52.6 | 47.4 | (38) |
| Seniors % | 50.0 | 50.0 | (20) |
| Total % | 58.5 | 41.5 | (82) |

Table 5 shows that the students who intend to go to graduate school were consistent with overall survey results in that they (62.5%) were against merging content and language-training courses (Design1), although there is a sizable minority that finds this idea acceptable (29.1%). On the other hand, they showed a strong tendency (62.5%) to agree with the idea of the thematic content-based skills classes (Design 2). In terms of students who intend to seek jobs upon graduation, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (82.3%) disliked the idea of content-driven integration (Design 1), with none of them believing the idea of content-driven integration was completely acceptable. However, half of them (50%) could accept the idea of specialized language-driven content-based skills classes (Design 2).

Table 5 Attitudes toward Course Designs from Students Who Want to Pursue Graduate Study and Who Want to Enter the Workplace

| Answer key | Design 1: Combine skills classes with content classes (do not have separate skills classes). | | Design 2: Keep skills classes and teach with literature, linguistics, or TESOL topics. | |
|-------------|--|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| | Plan for advanced study (frequency)% | Plan for Employment (frequency)% | Plan for advanced study (frequency)% | Plan for Employment (frequency)% |
| Disagree | (10) 20.8 | (8) 23.5 | (1) 2.1 | (2) 5.9 |
| Maybe not | (20) 41.7 | (20) 58.8 | (6) 12.5 | (8) 23.5 |
| No comments | (4) 8.3 | (3) 8.8 | (11) 22.9 | (7) 20.6 |
| Maybe yes | (10) 20.8 | (3) 8.8 | (25) 52.1 | (16) 47.1 |
| Agree | (4) 8.3 | (0) 0.0 | (5) 10.4 | (1) 2.9 |
| Total | (48) 100.0 | (34) 100.0 | (48) 100.0 | (34) 100.0 |

Findings and Discussion

Based on the data above, the researchers answered the research questions by presenting two major claims: first, students disliked the idea of adopting language-skills training classes based on a sheltered model that is strongly content-driven; second, the respondents actually felt that the number of language-skills training courses was insufficient and desired an increase in their number.

The Content-Driven Design

Regarding the English majors' attitude toward the two proposed designs, the researchers observed that the students disliked the content-driven design (Design 1), which eliminates language-skills courses and incorporates language-skills training into literature, linguistics, and TESOL content courses (Table 5). Over 70 percent of the students preferred language-skills courses that are not integrated in such a manner. In contrast, over 55 percent of the students were at least somewhat agreeable to Design 2 (more language-driven), which maintains separate language-skills courses while covering specialized topics or themes in literature, linguistics, and TESOL (Table 5).

There are several possible explanations for these English majors' dislike of the content-driven design. First, the correlation analysis on the relationship between students' future career intentions and their attitudes toward the two course designs substantiates that fact that the students disapprove of the content-driven design because they think that they need more training on language skills.

Of the 41 percent who planned to seek employment, an overwhelming majority of respondents (82%) disliked the idea of content-driven design (Design 1). This finding shows a practical concern. It could be deduced that employment bound students believe that language skills will provide them with an edge in the tight job market and do not want the courses to be confined to limited theme-based topics of literature, linguistics, and TESOL.

In contrast, half of the employment bound students (50%) perceived the notion of language-driven courses (Design 2) as acceptable. Nevertheless, fewer employment-seeking students (50%) than graduate-school bound students (62%) accept having specialized topics in their language-skills training courses (Design 2). On the other hand, of those who intended to pursue graduate school, 62 percent were against Design 1 while the same percentage was in favor of Design 2 (Table 5). These findings indicate that graduate-school bound students felt they needed more academic knowledge. Therefore, they preferred specialized topics in their language-skills training courses.

Second, the research findings indicate that students are generally satisfied with the current curriculum system, which is very language-driven. They responded positively about the usefulness of the current language-training courses in equipping them well for their future plans and enhancing their language skills. They were also positive about the importance of language-training courses. Hence, students may have the perception that combining language-training courses with content course results in less language training. Thus their perception of CBI was negative because they thought it would reduce their language training.

Finally, students in this study may not understand what CBI is. This idea of CBI is mostly used for ESL, but not for EFL. It is designed mostly for the purposes of ESL learners, but is not a well-known concept for EFL learners who may be uncertain about the proposal.

More Language-Skills Training

Next, the researchers contend that the respondents demanded more language-skills training courses because they felt a need for more explicit instruction on skills and more opportunities to practice those skills. A great majority of the respondents opposed Design 1 (content-driven, with language-skills courses eliminated) and the elimination of language-skills courses regardless of the course design. Over 70% of the respondents found the current language-skills courses insufficient in number and were eager for more classes to develop their language skills (informed

by their comments). Also, more respondents (56%) appeared agreeable to Design 2 (language-driven), in which maintaining (though not increasing) separate language-skills courses is probably a factor that convinced them that such a course design might still be helpful. Furthermore, the one-third who responded negatively indicated a need for a significant increase of language-skills courses. Although dissatisfied with their personal experiences in their courses, these informants still wanted more language-skills training in general.

Such an argument is grounded on two observable facts. First, in a country where English is spoken as a foreign language, students generally do not receive great amounts of natural English linguistic input in their daily lives. In other words, the amount of natural linguistic input is not sufficient to facilitate the learning of English (Krashen, 1985), and it may take longer for an EFL learner than an ESL learner to master the same skill or acquire the same competence level. This contextual difference easily distinguishes them from ESL students who have constant access to the target language. Therefore, when they cannot obtain the natural immersion required for language learning, they see the institutionalized curriculum as a major source of language input.

Second, students are still heavily dependent upon skills-based instruction (SBI). When Taiwanese EFL learners are at their beginning level (e.g., elementary or high school) of learning English, most instructors seem to prefer SBI since they can address language skills explicitly and intensively. SBI does not require the teacher and the students to have a specific in-depth knowledge base of any content area, and the “content” in the language learning activities used in those courses is usually bits and pieces of information—mostly non-contextualized—that help learners comprehend discrete language skills. Content knowledge is rarely tested in those skills-based courses. Such reliance on specific skills instruction can also explain why the language-driven course design seems acceptable to the majority of the respondents while the strong CBI model without separate skills instruction is rejected by more than 70 percent of the respondents.

Although the students’ aspiration for the increase of language-skills courses is perceivable, it should be noted that relevant and well-arranged content in effect may help the learning of language skills (Stoller, 2004; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). A course design of relatively more content-driven instruction may further serve as a transitional course to help those EFL students move from the skills-based courses in high school to academic skills and content courses in higher education that are taught in English (Bragger and Rice, 1999, as cited in Stoller, 2004, p. 266). Nonetheless, control over the quality and quantity of input in a content-based course is

nothing less than a challenging task for EFL instructors.

Conclusion

This study explored the attitudes of students toward two course-design proposals to modify the language training curriculum for English majors at a top-tier university in Taiwan. The first proposal, strongly content-driven, would integrate language training into content classes, taking a sheltered approach to language training. The second proposal, although language-driven, moved from the status quo toward the content-driven end of the continuum; it took a thematic approach by proposing that the language training classes be built around topics related to the major content disciplines of the department: literature, linguistics, and TESOL.

The first major finding of the study was that the students had a strongly negative view of the proposal to adopt a stronger version of content-based instruction. The content-driven sheltered approach was rejected by the majority of the students, while the students' opinions concerning the language-driven thematic approach were inconclusive.

The second finding was that the students desire more language-skills training courses. Over 70% of the respondents found the current language-skills courses insufficient in quantity and were eager for more credit hours spent on developing their language skills. In addition, the students who were most dissatisfied with the language-training program and considered it least effective for equipping them for their future careers actually wanted to have *more* language-skills courses instead of *fewer* language-skills ones.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, there were inconsistencies in the survey technique. One group of students filled in the questionnaire during their break between classes, but when the other group was surveyed, the instructor stopped the class and instructed the students to complete the survey. The comment section of the second group was richer, implying that the students filled out the survey more conscientiously. However, when the statistical analysis of the questionnaire was done, these two groups were not differentiated.

Also, as alluded to in the previous limitation, the informants could have been probed more deeply for their opinions. The questionnaire survey technique used for this study can provide insight into the general opinion trends that exist within the department that was studied;

however, the specific reasons underlying these trends are unavailable. There were a number of open-ended questions on the questionnaire that elicited comments, but it was beyond the scope of the present paper to delve into a qualitative analysis of the student comments. Those comments given by the respondents, nevertheless, would provide a wealth of material that could be valuable for further research on this subject.

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