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Adapting the Adjunct Model: A Case Study

Martha Iancu

Language educators seek to provide meaningful content and opportunities for real communication to facilitate language learning. One approach to this goal is content-based ESL, in which students build their language skills as they interact with academic content, whether in ESL topic-centered modules or minicourses, sheltered subject matter courses, or ESL adjunct courses (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Shih, 1986).

In the adjunct model of content-based ESL at the college level, ESL students attend an academic content course that is paired with an adjunct ESL skills course. ESL students are expected to fulfill all content course requirements. In the adjunct ESL course, students develop their academic English skills using content from the regular course. The adjunct model can and should be adapted to suit the unique and changing conditions of any particular program (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989).

When content instruction was integrated with ESL skills instruction at a small liberal arts college in Oregon, tensions arose for both students and instructor. Many students focused on mastering content and neglected their language skills, while the ESL instructor struggled to balance the roles of language and content specialist. After presenting the reasons for adopting and maintaining the adjunct model in this setting, I will detail how efforts to resolve tensions involving content and language skills have gradually transformed an adjunct *course* into an adjunct *program*.

Background

The English Language Institute (ELI) at George Fox College in Newberg, Oregon,

adopted the adjunct model of content-based ESL in an attempt to raise student morale by providing a different context for learning English. We also hoped that adjunct courses would motivate students, help to integrate them into the college community, and

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facilitate their transition into regular academic courses.

The ELI prepares native-Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican students, immigrant students from Mexico, and students from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other countries to pursue an undergraduate academic degree at a U.S. college or university. A few students, however, do not plan to continue their education in the U.S. but come to learn some English and enjoy an American experience.

The ELI's early struggles to provide effective, culturally sensitive, multilevel instruction to a small number of students fell short of the mark. In its second year, the ELI suffered a crisis in terms of student morale. Sensing that drastic change was needed to keep the program alive, the faculty abandoned the skills-based program structure during spring semester 1989, and ESL students attended a U.S. history course along with an ESL adjunct course. Later, we reintroduced a skills-based curriculum that included paired content and ESL courses for higher level students. As the program has evolved over 2 1/2 years, the adjunct model has fulfilled our expectations and brought other benefits as well.

First, students are highly motivated to succeed in a credit-bearing academic course. Most recognize that ESL adjunct courses help them to develop skills essential for success in college coursework. Many students express appreciation for ESL courses rather than frustration about having to "stay in ESL."

Second, enrollment in a regular academic course helps ESL students feel more a part of college life and helps them develop relationships with English-speaking peers. Relationships may not occur spontaneously

but can be cultivated through specific assignments, such as peer dialogue journals.

Third, the adjunct model greatly eases the transition between ESL status and regular student status. It helps students realize what challenges they will face as regular students and motivates them to develop language and academic skills. It requires students to perform academically, yet provides a support system to enhance their ability to do so. Finally, because it generates invaluable information about each student's ability to manage the demands of regular courses, it helps teachers decide when a student is ready to advance.

Besides these anticipated effects, the adjunct model has produced other benefits for our faculty and curriculum. First, it has helped to integrate ESL faculty into the college faculty. Collaboration with other faculty members has enhanced mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect for the activity of preparing nonnative English speakers for U.S. college courses. Cooperation between the ESL and history faculties has also facilitated the restructuring of one history course—which now offers modified examinations and includes frequent small-group discussions, a teaching style that Benesch (1992) encourages ESL faculty to foster in other disciplines.

Finally, the adjunct model has profoundly affected ELI curriculum by enhancing ESL faculty familiarity with how students in regular courses are expected to perform. As we identify specific academic skills, we incorporate them systematically into the ELI curriculum at appropriate levels. As a result, expectations of student performance are becoming more rigorous and focused at every level.

The adjunct model has brought distinct benefits, but it has not been without problems. The evolution of the adjunct model at the ELI has been shaped by attempts to resolve these issues.

Phase 1—Spring 1990

Three key tasks involved in attempting the adjunct model of content-based ESL in spring 1990 were to (a) select a content course, (b) establish an English proficiency range for the group, and (c) define how the paired courses would fit into the ESL program.

We selected a general education course in U.S. history for several

reasons. First, the professor was interested in working with ESL students. Next, along with lectures, this professor used a variety of media and learning activities both in and out of class. We felt that this variety would allow ESL students to develop a greater range of academic and language skills, and enhance their chances for success. In addition, a course fulfilling a general education requirement would be of interest to every ESL student who planned to pursue degree studies. Finally, we considered the subject matter, the history of the United States, to be especially pertinent to help students interpret their American experiences.

Twenty students with intermediate to advanced English proficiency, with TOEFL scores ranging from 387 to 520, enrolled during spring 1990. Both the number and language abilities of the students caused problems. First, the ESL students comprised about a third of the students in the history class, significantly altering classroom dynamics. Second, most students' English skills were too low for them to do the reading and grasp important lecture points without help. They sought assistance from the ESL instructor in understanding the material and, if they perceived that an activity did not lead directly to the limited goal of passing the history course, they viewed it as "extra" and resisted it. For

example, when students realized that they would receive study keys for their multiple choice exams a week ahead of time, they did not want to complete the assigned readings from the history course syllabus, preferring instead to wait for the study key—as did many of their U.S. classmates—and then merely scan a few pages for answers. Likewise, students considered as superfluous other assignments related to the reading, such as outlining or summarizing main ideas.

In terms of its relationship to the program, we viewed the history course with its ESL adjunct course simply as another component, independent of other courses. These two 3-hour courses replaced the reading course and the listening and note-taking course. The writing and grammar course and the speech course remained unchanged (see Figure 1).

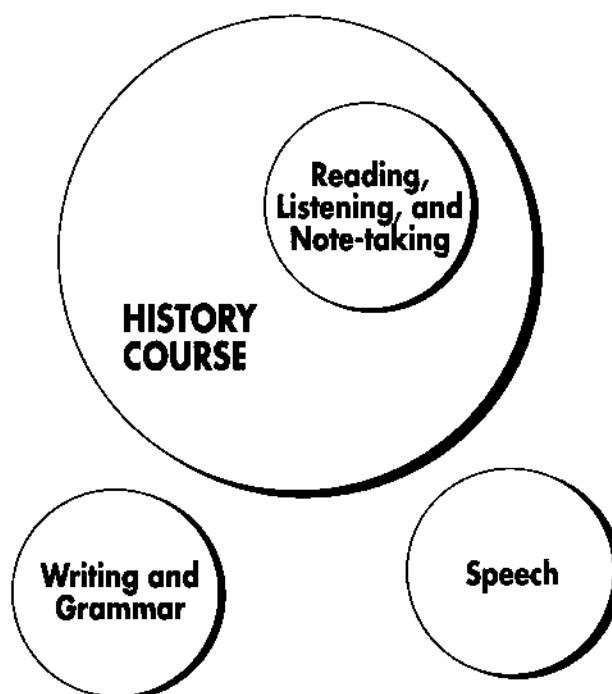
Students were taking elective ESL courses as well, so that some were enrolled in as many as 21 hours. For many of the students, one 3-hour adjunct course was not adequate. Also, the use of unrelated materials in the other ESL courses generated a feeling of fragmentation and overload.

We found that there was a significant mismatch between the history course requirements, the ESL students' abilities, and the time allotted for development of academic English skills. It produced a situation in which highly motivated but inadequately prepared students regarded the ESL instructor as their key to passing the content course, that is, as their content tutor. As ESL instructor, I considered the role of content tutor inappropriate, believing I would become a crutch for the students, perhaps enabling them to pass one course but not necessarily helping them develop skills that they would be able to apply independently in future courses. Nevertheless, I recognized that the students' need for content support was real.

Phase 2—Fall 1990/Spring 1991

To better help the students improve their academic English skills using the adjunct model, we made some significant adjustments. The following year, we raised the minimum required English proficiency of students in the paired courses and increased the number of ESL adjunct course hours. Through these and other changes, the ESL adjunct course began to evolve into an ESL adjunct program.

Initial Relationship of Content Course to ESL Courses



To challenge repeaters with a fresh content course, we selected an introductory sociology course in the fall semester to alternate with the spring semester U.S. history course. Like the history professor, the sociology professor was interested in working with international students and offered course activities that allowed for differences in students' learning styles. The course fulfilled general education requirements and international students trying to make sense of U.S. culture considered its content helpful. In contrast to the history course, the sociology course required the students to write a research paper. Therefore, the fall semester ESL writing course was re-focused to guide the students through the process of writing a research paper.

To ensure that the students possessed most of the fundamental English skills necessary to function in a regular content course with ESL support, we increased the minimum English proficiency for new students to TOEFL 440-450. This level of proficiency might be considered low for students who are expected to perform satisfactorily in a college course; nevertheless, a threshold score of 450 for the advanced level is consistent with the program's four-level structure. Raising the minimum required English proficiency of the adjunct courses to TOEFL 480 or 500 (as, e.g., at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont [Duffy, 1991]), was not possible given budgetary and curricular constraints. However, students who felt that they were not yet ready to attend a regular course could request placement in a lower level in the ELI.

One result of increasing the minimum proficiency was a reduction in class size to 10 students in 1990-1991 and 5 in 1991-1992, or between 10 and 20 percent of the students in the regular class. Higher proficiency and lower numbers of ESL students in their classes enabled the professors to view the ESL students more as a source of enrichment through diversity than as an impediment to classroom interaction. In addition, the smaller class size allowed the ESL instructor to provide greater amounts of timely, specific feedback on student assignments.

We began a process of integrating content and skills from the content courses into the Level 4 curriculum (see Figure 2), imparting a new sense of coherence. This

process occurred on several fronts. First, we added a second 3-hour ESL adjunct course so that the curriculum included Adjunct Reading and Adjunct Listening and Note-taking. At the same time, we reduced student access to elective courses from a maximum of 7 hours to 2 hours. In addition, the writing and grammar course began to incorporate content and skills from the content course, as students wrote essays in response to study questions from the content course. These changes addressed the most salient problems and did not constitute a comprehensive effort to connect the entire Level 4 curriculum to the content course. Thus, at this point, we made no changes in the speech course, which focused on public speaking.

During Phase 2, the adjunct program's success increased. Seventy to ninety percent of the students were promoted during Phase 2, compared to 35 percent of the Phase 1 group.

The changes made during Phase 2 ameliorated but did not completely resolve the problem of student dependence upon the ESL instructor for content support. In fact, with one ESL instructor teaching both adjunct ESL courses and, in spring 1991, the writing and grammar course as well, the program itself was structured so that the students'

primary resource for coping with the sociology or history content was the ESL instructor.

The rationale for having one ESL instructor teach this group of adjunct courses was that it would be easier for one ESL instructor to coordinate the adjunct courses with the content of the regular course. One ESL instructor would be able to monitor syllabus changes, keep track of the relationship between readings and lectures, and consult with the content area professor about the course itself and each student's needs and accomplishments. These advantages are real, but there are also drawbacks. In addition to their tendency to look to the ESL instructor for content support, the students do not gain the benefits of working with diverse instructors, and the adjunct program itself does not benefit from the insights of various instructors. Thus, faculty—and the program itself—are deprived of the potential benefits of collaboration between different ESL and content course faculty.

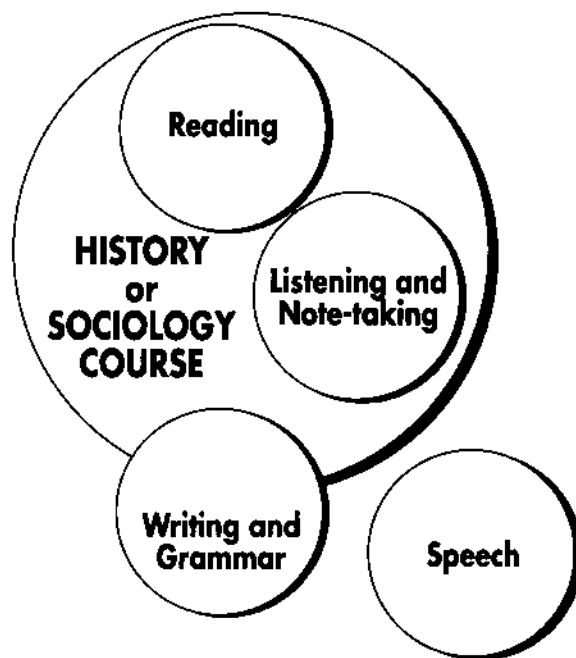
Phase 3—Fall 1991/Spring 1992

During Phase 3, we made three significant modifications in the way the content course fit into the program. First, we integrated content and skills from the sociology and history courses more systematically into the writing and grammar course. Second, three different instructors taught the adjunct listening, adjunct reading, and writing and grammar courses. Finally, a tutor helped students with content.

Figure 3 illustrates how the process of integrating content and skills from the content courses into the Level 4 curriculum progressed.

The writing and grammar course linked most assignments to the sociology and history course content. To bring consistency to the fall and spring semester writing courses, we added a research paper to the spring semester course. (The history professor agreed to evaluate the content of these papers, even though a research paper was not a requirement of this history course. The ESL instructor evaluated technical aspects of process and form.) Students interacted with content on a less formal plane in peer dialogue journals. Other assignments involved various types of academic writing, including essay tests and reaction papers. In their writing activities, students reflected on content from their sociology or history course in a way similar to that proposed by Benesch (1992).

Early Relationship of Content Course to ESL Courses



In contrast, the speech course during fall semester was completely independent of the sociology course. Because ESL students tended to experience great difficulty participating in small-group discussions, we added to the spring semester speech course a component aimed at improving small-group discussion skills. To minimize the outside preparation time of U.S. students who assisted with small-group discussion activities, we based this component on general topics rather than content from the history course.

Two different instructors taught the adjunct listening and reading courses, and a third taught the writing and speech courses. For such a division of labor to succeed, it was crucial to have frequent communication among the three ESL instructors and the content course professor. The adjunct listening instructor, who attended every lecture, relayed routine information to the other two ESL instructors. On specific issues, each ESL instructor worked directly with the content course professor. The ESL faculty reported that teaching in the adjunct program required more preparation time than did teaching independent ESL courses, but improved student attitudes and progress made the additional effort worthwhile.

To provide further support, a U.S. student who had previously taken the sociology or history course tutored the ESL students. The tutor attended the course with the students and met with them for 3 hours per week to discuss the ideas covered in the lectures and readings.

These three changes improved the effectiveness of the program. Integrating the content of the sociology or history course into the ESL writing course gave the students another opportunity to interact with content more thoroughly because they knew that the writing assigning would help them to deepen their understanding of key concepts and directly enhance their performance in the course.

Interaction with three ESL instructors and a tutor, rather than one ESL instructor, had the desired effect of changing the students' attitudes towards the ESL instructor and the ESL courses. Students no longer considered the ESL instructor their one great hope for passing the regular course. They realized that no single ESL instructor had all the answers and that they themselves were responsible for their

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learning, using many resources—including the ESL instructors, but also their tutor, their dialogue journal partners, other students, and the sociology or history professor—in the process. Student and faculty satisfaction improved significantly. All of the students were promoted during Phase 3.

Phase 4—Fall 1992/Spring 1993

One of our goals for Phase 4 has been to continue the process of integrating content from the sociology and history courses into the ESL writing and speech courses (See Figure, p. 24). We also want to increase emphasis in the speech course on boosting the students' confidence and ability to participate in small-group discussion and other classroom interaction. To this end, we plan to replace general public speaking topics with subjects related to the content and link small-group discussion activities to the content course syllabus.

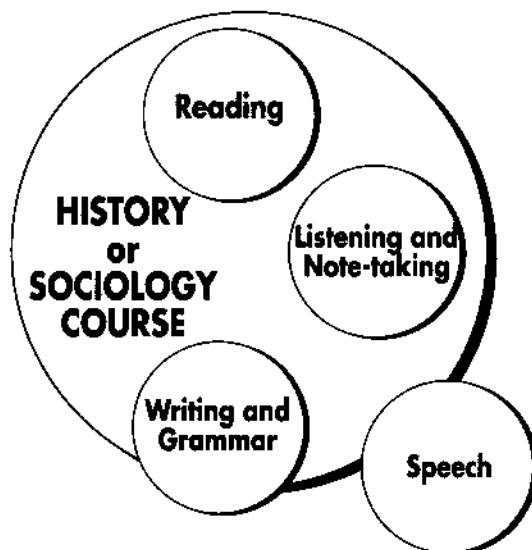
Conclusion

Even in the best circumstances, "paired arrangements can easily turn the ESL class into a tutoring service ..." (Benesch, 1992, p. 8), a clear cause for concern. Our experience shows that the lower the English proficiency of the students enrolled in an adjunct program, the more language instruction they need, the greater the challenge for them to understand and learn the course content, and the more likely they are to look to the ESL

instructor for assistance with content. A major consideration in implementing the adjunct model for students whose English proficiency is about TOEFL 450 is to provide them adequate instruction and support without compromising the integrity of ESL faculty. As a result, over the span of 3 years, we have expanded an adjunct course into an adjunct program in which every ESL course offered at the advanced level—reading, writing, listening, and speech—gives students opportunities to grapple with concepts from the sociology or history course. Results have been most satisfactory when several different instructors teach the ESL courses and when students have access to content tutoring.

The ongoing process of improving the delivery of content-based ESL will lead the ESL community to explore new variations on the adjunct model theme. Our

Present Relationship of Content Course to ESL Courses



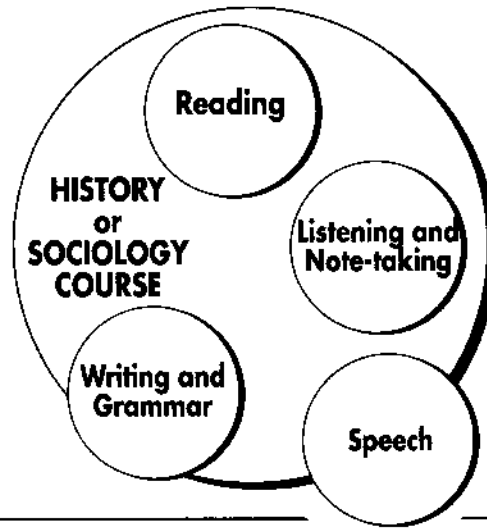
experience is that incorporating a content course into the advanced level of an intensive English program benefits not only that level, but the program as a whole. This account is offered in the spirit of sharing experiences and insights, as Brinton, Snow, & Wesche (1989) encourage.

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Target Relationship of Content Course to ESL Courses



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