



## Deborah Short, Ph.D., Center for Applied Linguistics

Deborah J. Short is a senior research associate who co-developed the SIOP Model and has directed quasi-experimental and experimental research on English language learners. Publications include articles in TESOL Quarterly, Journal of Educational Research, Educational Leadership; and several ESL series for National Geographic/Hampton-Brown including *Edge*, *Inside*, *High Point*, and *Avenues* for K-12 students.

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# Base Your ESL Instruction in the Content Areas *by Deborah Short*

Schools across the United States are composed of ethnically and linguistically diverse students, and a growing number of them speak English as a new language. According to state-reported data, more than 5 million English language learners (ELLs) were enrolled in grades Pre-K through 12 in the 2005-2006 school year. From 1995-96 to 2005-06, their enrollment increased 57 percent although total enrollment increased by only 3 percent (NCELA, 2009). Most of the ELLs are in the elementary grades (Capps, et al., 2005). Unfortunately, these ELLs as a group are not succeeding as well as native English speakers on national and state assessments. On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for example, the average reading score for fourth grade ELLs was 36 points lower than that for English speakers. Moreover, 70 percent of these ELLs scored “below basic,” the lowest level (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). Similarly, ELLs on average scored 25 points lower on the fourth grade math test with 44 percent scoring “below basic” (Lee, Grigg, & Dion, 2007). ELLs clearly need support in acquiring academic English and in achieving success in content area classes.

**The challenge of content-area learning** Given the growth in the number of students who are not proficient in English, the language of instruction for most schools, classroom scenes like the following are common:

*Loan wants to tell the teacher what she remembers about forests in her country but she doesn't have the words to explain. She isn't sure how her experiences relate to her science text. She sees photos of forests and the trees have red, orange, and yellow leaves. In other photos the trees look dead and the ground is white. Birds and other animals look different too. These aren't like the forests in Vietnam. Why not? Loan sits quietly and tries to follow what the teacher says, but he speaks quickly and doesn't write words on the board or show other pictures. She hears the word fall, but the trees didn't fall down, and cycle, but there is no bicycle. Loan*

*fears the teacher thinks she is a poor student, but she just doesn't know how to express her questions or describe the forests of her country.*

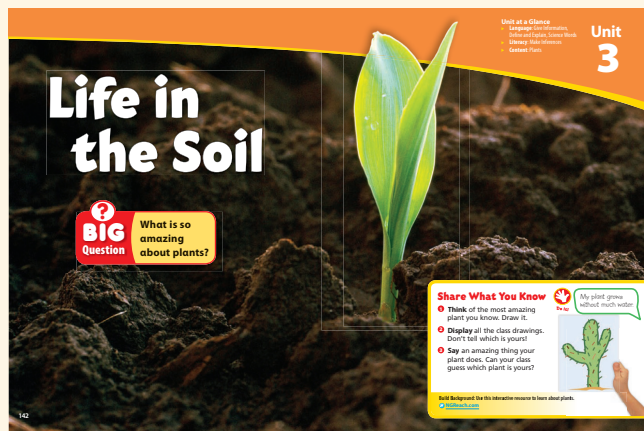
*Juan Miguel was born in the U.S. and is now in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. He is very social, speaks English and Spanish and contributes to group work in class. But when he has to read his social studies book and respond to teacher questions or write a summary, he falters. His writing consists of basic short sentences. He doesn't relate abstract concepts being studied to what's been learned. Juan Miguel was in a bilingual program for kindergarten and first grade and then moved to an English program for the past two years. He has been at the intermediate level of English proficiency since the start of third grade.*

Many second language learners like Loan and Juan Miguel want to do well in school but struggle to participate actively in their subjects. Even when these students learn to speak some English, they may not have the necessary academic language skills and relevant background knowledge to complete many academic tasks, such as comparing two historical events, solving math word problems, writing observations for a science experiment, and summarizing a story. After one year in school, most ELLs are tested on grade-level curricula in English even though they are not proficient in their new language. This situation is not only difficult for the students but also for their teachers, few of whom have had professional development on effective approaches for integrating language and content instruction for students who are not proficient in English. Language is the key to learning in schools; we primarily learn through language and use language to demonstrate our knowledge. This fact rings particularly true for educators who work with students learning English as a new language while they are learning academic content. Without oral and written English language skills, students are hard pressed to learn and demonstrate their knowledge.

**The solution: Content-based ESL instruction** Many schools have offered English as a second language instruction (ESL) to ELLs like Loan and Juan Miguel. But traditionally this instruction has focused on survival language, storytelling, grammar drills, and basic vocabulary. It has often been unrelated to what's happening in other classes, and so hasn't been sufficient to help students succeed in school. Instead, educators need to consider ESL instruction as part of an overall program that develops language skills alongside, and in conjunction with, content area knowledge. This solution is frequently referred to as content-based ESL (CBESL). Content-based ESL classes are taught by language educators with two goals (Lyster, 2007; Short, 2006; Stoller, 2004):

- to develop English language proficiency
- to prepare ELLs for success in mainstream classes, especially in the content areas

Content-based ESL teachers develop students' English language proficiency by incorporating topics from the subject areas that students study in their grade level. This is often accomplished through thematic units, such as a plants or water cycle unit. Lessons can include objectives drawn from life sciences, social studies, language arts, and mathematics. Lessons target key content area vocabulary as well as the academic tasks ELLs need to become familiar with for the regular classroom (e.g., creating a timeline, taking notes from reference materials, making an oral presentation).



- ▲ Thematic units in *National Geographic Reach* link language skills to content area learning.

## Integrate language skills with content learning

Content-based ESL teachers are responsible for addressing all the state ESL/English language proficiency (ELP) standards. Teachers must provide explicit instruction in the language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and the elements of English (vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and conventions). However, CBESL teachers do not teach these skills in isolation, nor with a focus on conversational language. Rather they design lessons, select texts, and set assignments that reflect how those skills are applied in content classrooms. For example, if students are expected to record observations during a neighborhood walk in an upcoming social studies lesson, the CBESL teacher may teach descriptive adjectives, directional terms, and names of community resources beforehand. Or, if the students have to classify and compare animals, CBESL teachers may teach students academic language frames so they can use comparative expressions like “both . . . and . . . , neither . . . nor . . . ”; “. . . are alike/different because. . . ”, and “on the one hand. . . , on the other hand. . . ”

It is particularly important that CBESL teachers incorporate many opportunities for oral language practice. During much of the school day, as Saunders and Goldenberg (in press) point out, students are engaged in content area instruction and reading and writing tasks, so an emphasis on listening and speaking in ESL/ELD time is crucial. In contrast to traditional ESL instruction, this listening and speaking time should develop skills needed for content learning. Keep in mind that in many content classes teachers don't take advantage of teachable moments for language development. They tend to correct students for content errors, not linguistic ones. They don't ask students to expand on their ideas or use elaborated speech. They don't encourage students to reformulate responses to negotiate meaning but provide the clarifications themselves (Musimeci, 1996, Swain, 1987). Effective content-based ESL teachers in contrast will do these things that advance second language acquisition.

Key Words	
blossom	produce
characteristic	root
conditions	seed
cycle	soil
depend	sprout
growth	

- ◀ Vocabulary lessons include Key Words that are essential for student success in the content areas.

### Language of the Day

What amazing thing do I know about plants?  
I know that plants \_\_\_\_.

- ▲ Daily oral language activities develop students' ability to use academic language in talking about content area topics.

In content-based ESL, teachers spend time helping students apply their growing knowledge base in strategic ways. For example, CBESL teachers introduce language learning strategies to students (e.g., using cognates to determine meanings of unknown words, rehearsing sentences before speaking, previewing headings and illustrations before reading) to help them continue their language development on their own and to assist them in other subjects. They also focus on reading comprehension strategies (e.g., making connections, determining importance) through a variety of authentic and meaningful texts related to the content topics.

Content-based ESL classes offer valuable opportunities to build students' background knowledge, which is critical for conceptual understanding and reading comprehension. For ELLs who are not familiar with American culture or who have had interrupted schooling, CBESL lessons can introduce students to academic topics their classmates know already. By tapping into what ELLs know, teachers make connections to new or related concepts and clear up misconceptions. Through simulations, video clips, field trips, and hands-on experiences, teachers also build foundational knowledge for these learners.



Science features support English learners in building academic knowledge and skills.

*National Geographic Reach* has been designed specifically to support content-based ESL classes. The content-rich materials, student activities, and lesson plans promote academic language learning that is connected to the other subjects in a student's school day.

*Reach* emphasizes major topics of science and social studies through thematic units that incorporate academic and content vocabulary and subject-specific tasks. The program also includes suggestions for relating themes to students' own experiences, cultures, and personal lives. Within a unit, each lesson builds on prior lessons to reinforce and extend the information students are learning and the language skills they are acquiring.

*National Geographic Reach* uses standards-based instruction as the medium for teaching English. The program is aligned with national and state curriculum standards for ESL/ELD, English language arts, science, and social studies. It addresses students' language development needs by providing:

- Daily oral language practice tied to content concepts and target language functions
- Attention to academic and content vocabulary through multimodal activities
- Comprehensive grammar instruction
- Authentic content reading selections drawn from diverse genres with built-in support
- Writing tasks for fluency, interactive writing, and independent writing with tools and resources

*National Geographic Reach* prepares ELLs for English-medium classes by giving them practice with key academic language, tasks, and topics. *National Geographic Reach* lessons give students opportunities to read varied fiction and nonfiction texts, to understand narrative structures like cause-effect and problem-and-solution, and to use text features to identify important information in science and social studies articles. Key vocabulary is taught to younger children through songs, games, role-play, and colorful visuals. Older children learn key vocabulary through graphics, word webbing, and other research-based word-learning strategies. Writing projects, such as writing a science article or a persuasive essay, mirror the assignments found in content classes.

## Conclusion

Students need dedicated time for ESL/ELD instruction and that time needs to count (Saunders & Goldenberg, in press). Content-based ESL transforms a traditional ESL class into a forum for developing and applying subject knowledge, so CBESL instruction becomes an anchor for content classes. The material is relevant and meaningful to the students because it is aligned with their school subjects and standards. Infusing content in reading, writing, and oral language practice, as *National Geographic Reach* does, will equip our students with the academic language skills they need for success in school. And as ELLs strengthen these skills, they will interact more with English-speaking peers, demonstrate skills associated with academic uses of language, and improve their English reading comprehension.