How to reconcile form and contents in « English as a general subject »?

Faultlines and flaws
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Teaching English as vector and contents

This presentation will focus on discussing why it is essential to keep on teaching English as a vector, to convey primary contents in fields as varied as science, technology, business, AI, history, geography, political science, linguistics, epistemology etc.

In this respect, teaching English as both vector and contents may appear as a broad permission to tackle and discuss almost any topic. Meanwhile, the English teacher’s level of know-how and precision ought to be bottomless.

In an ever-evolving world, where instant checking by students, as well as complex input -supervised by AI- have become rule, a teacher’s strength and capabilities might be challenged at any time, and during every class.
« Soft skills » and « Hard skills »

# Some flaws may thus appear, as the borderline between vector and contents can be somewhat blurred. Hence the paradox: "how to teach about complex subjects, with a bottomless level of specialization, through English?"

# Recognition by peers is a key issue in terms of legitimacy with students, and it might only be achieved through initial consultation, legibility (what issues are being addressed?), effective communication between all staff members, consistency in marking and final feedback and keeping with CECRL markers.

# In fact, even more than others, English teachers must be mastering « hard skills » (their linguistic, phonetic, grammatical abilities and their thorough understanding of literature and history of the English-speaking world), as well as “soft skills”: immediate psychology, ability to create cohesion and coherence in ever-evolving language groups, ability to transfer knowledge and know-how, aptitude to obtain legitimacy in marking, grading and granting certifications.
Faultline or « Elephant in the room »?

Any random topic might be discussed, but there could be a hitch, a “faultline“.

# Dealing with general English implies dealing with many different approaches and types of skills (scientific, literary, historical, political…). As a result, studying the press with a specific angle might often appear as a « simple » way to analyze texts and topics. However, some “faultiness” might show.

# English class, for some students, might be equated with « imperialism class » (ie: military rôle of the US, soft power coming from major western « key players », former colonial countries where English is spoken). In addition, Brexit has transformed the relationship between Britons and other Europeans. The existence of this « silent but sometimes overwhelming subtext » might create a faultline in the dialogue between students and teachers.

# Thus, addressing the reality of English-speaking countries in Africa, in Asia, in Australia might be a great way to address contemporary issues without generating « passive rejection ». Also, discovering new realities might encourage the learning process, through sheer discovery, without overlooking the past.

# In many cases, the « alternative » geographical dimension might be a way to create bridges with other subjects (archaeology, art, history, geography, media studies, political science, engineering etc.). However the political subtleties of these regions shouldn’t be overlooked and the notion of human rights should always be at the core of the analysis.
« Good Teacher » or « Good Specialist » ?

Seemingly, middle school and high school teachers hold many keys to understanding what a « learning progression » might be: choosing specific topics and illustrating them, asking the students about their tastes and fields of study, creating a « scholarly atmosphere » thanks to simple « teaching tips » (greetings, acknowledging the students’ presence by learning and calling their names, praising meaningful contributions to the class, asking students to repeat what their friends have said, encouraging pair work and peer correction...).

Being always on time and always there, answering the students’ emails with accurate and polite responses might also be among the skills developed by teachers in secondary schools. These « social skills » will be applied to a third-level context with the greatest appreciation from students who seem almost surprised to be acknowledged and considered.

Often in a middle school (or high school), pupils salute their English teacher, as he/she has taught them to say: « hello, good morning » and they are happy to practise greetings, even in the staircase or in the hall. In the more difficult schools, these greetings might be the first polite interaction of the day. Acknowledging others can also be a great way to establish better relationships between teacher and students and allow the learning process to take place, even at a higher level of education.

Paradoxically and to a large extent, these soft skills will grant teachers the possibility to convey their « hard skills » and to build trust and legitimacy. Spending more time with the English teacher might also be explored when looking at the effective potential to learn more (1TD/ 1:30 per week, per semester and per student, including assessment time, might grant too little time for effective progress).
No «Care Bears», but sensible specialists

# Teaching English at University for a huge variety of subjects might appear complex and sometimes even irrelevant (one group might be a mix between students in law, economics, archaeology, history, cinema...). But the legitimacy of «teaching English as a general subject» relies upon the instructors’ ability to give students meaningful contents, to be used and compared in their fields of study.

# Therefore, taking the necessary time to understand the students’ backgrounds might guarantee greater commitment to the class (what subjects are they particularly interested in, what presentations did they do in the past?)

# In a post-covid context, students seem to be particularly sensitive -and responsive- to «gentle» instructors, who take the necessary time to learn their names and to greet them politely. However, legitimacy remains based on the accuracy and legitimacy of contents (hard skills).

# At a time when student poverty and «existential difficulties» have been largely discussed, choosing contents which are both interesting and offering the potential for a «brighter future» might make sense. More than ever, general consistency in the syllabus and the existence of a «real» communication between instructors and teachers will be beneficial.

# Listening to the students' expertise might also be a way to let them «take over the responsibility of their conclusions and analysis» on complex issues in their fields of expertise (ie: a presentation about the economic situation in Nigeria for instance).
Qualifications and certifications

# English teachers are supposedly qualified to understand and analyze a wide variety of topics, but too often, their « pedagogical » choices tend to rely upon their personal interests or initial training: in literature, civilization(s) and/or linguistics. Therefore, analysing complex economic papers or scientific publications may sometimes appear to them as being « boring », while their contents could be too specific for students in « general English ».

# However, at third-level, different fields of instruction rely heavily upon specialists (in law, media studies, political studies, engineering…) with a superior command of English. Often, being qualified, being a good linguist and having studied abroad may not be just quite enough to teach a « relevant » English class, in keeping with other classes. Hence the importance of communication between fellow teachers (students do communicate a lot via WhatsApp or any other app).

# Marking and granting certifications as well as reference letters seem to be an essential part of the teacher’s job. A greater consistency with CECRL requirements (and logic connection with the level granted in high school) could be of help. In case the choice of a private center of evaluation for the « langage certifications » may have been made by the educational structure, consultation of English Teachers, as well as « basic training » might be of help to the students and their instructors.
Some recommendations

# Building a legible curriculum leading from beginners to «confirmed» students.
# Establishing a clear parallel with the CECRL (both for contents and grading).
# Designing – and making use of- books with a validated curriculum for third-level students (from A2 to C2 in the CECRL).
# Acknowledging previously acquired background, (thanks to a test at the beginning of the semester/set of semesters - LMD?).
# When possible, organising museum visits (at least one per semester), in keeping with the semester’s main topics.
# Creating common background for the students at a given level (one «leading topic » per level, one common « launching » class at the beginning of the semester in presence of all lecturers).
# Establishing « peer to peer » work between English teachers and lecturers from different fields, with trainings in a variety of subjects (media analysis, law, AI, engineering for dummies…)
# Taking time to discuss with students about their tastes, their plans, their hopes and their fears. Many students feel isolated and English class tends to be an agreeable moment, when discussions (in English) may take place.