

# Understanding *What We Blend, How We Blend, and Why We Blend*

By Kara Mac Donald, Featured Speaker at the 2019 KOTESOL Intl. Conference

## Introduction

Students study what is prescribed for most of the K–12 educational experience. They then pursue a university degree with the objective of acquiring a professional skillset with the expectation of being competitive in the job market, assuming the market has a need for the specialized skillset. In markets like Korea, and elsewhere, a large number of individuals with specialized undergraduate and advanced degrees struggle to compete in competitive job markets. Graduates often feel at a loss, believing they made a responsible degree choice having assumed that a specialized degree (e.g., engineering) compared to a general humanities degree (e.g., liberal arts) would make them more competitive in the job market.

However, this has changed as employers want not only a specialized professional but also one that possesses a broad skillset: an individual who can work within a team, write grants, think creatively, solve problems, and so on. Graduates need more than one specialized skill if they want to be competitive in today's job market (Ryan, 2016). This is in part due to technological advances, but also a change in how businesses understand themselves and their ability to compete in a more global market.

This article examines why today's market demands a diverse skillset and how this informs English language teaching (ELT) to both prepare students at all educational levels for the world they will enter as a professional and a member of society.

## Current Economy and Cross-, Multi-, and Inter-Disciplinary Studies

Up until the industrial revolution, religion and classical texts framed education, addressing issues of morality and science fundamentals. Then, at the end of the

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nineteenth century, education took on the role of preparing individuals for the industrializing economy. A specialized education base was what the market needed. This altered the structure of university education with emphasis on disciplinary studies and research. In essence, higher education changed to producing a specialized skillset.

However, with the modern economy has come a demand for non-discipline-specific studies and work environments. This has led to various approaches reflecting new ways of operating. Cross-disciplinary approaches view one discipline from the perspective of another. Multi-disciplinary approaches use experts from different disciplines working together to benefit from each discipline's knowledge. Inter-disciplinary approaches incorporate knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a synthesis of approaches as one.

For example, agriculture makes use of genetic research and drone technology to produce desired taste and texture, improved yield, and crop maintenance



▲ Beyond collaborative language learning, we can utilize “cross-,” “multi-,” and “inter-” disciplinary approaches.

and oversight. Areas of the medical industry draw on work from psychology to address the mind-body connection to address responses to stress, chronic pain conditions, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Sport psychology draws on biomechanics, physiology, kinesiology, and psychology to teach cognitive and behavioral strategies to improve athletic performance. In much the same way, ELT blends disciplines, approaches, and technologies for its needs in diverse contexts, institutes, and classrooms.

### **ELT Blending Disciplines, Approaches, and Technologies**

Entering into the Information Age and the Era of Globalization, education across contexts examined what students needed to be competitive. In part, the focus was 21st century skills: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, information literacy, media literacy, technology literacy, flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity, social skills, and more, depending on your source. These skills are informed by content and practice in domains outside of one core subject. The same occurred in ELT, examining the need for the above skills but also for cross-cultural competence (ACTFL, 2014), which also

requires instruction from domains outside of language. The larger framework of developing non-language-specific skills was not ancillary but part of the core of instruction.

### **Beyond Theory and Trends, Instructional Practice in the Classroom**

Every teacher brings previous and current knowledge to the classroom (Stillwell, 2013). Each teacher also has at his/her access the invaluable resource of other teachers with diverse personal and professional experiences (Cosh, 1999) to draw on. Once an explicit awareness of utilizing these resources is present, instructional practice can be expanded beyond established boundaries.

As a first example, a teacher (who is a colleague) with a performing arts interest and a social science degree, advanced proficiency in four languages, and socio-cultural competences from living in those distinct countries utilizes all of the above to teach the target language in the classroom. Most impressively, she uses material from performing arts to teach content, build proficiency, and develop understanding between past and current socio-cultural and political contexts. She



uses classic target-language playwright texts, adapted for contemporary students' expression of the same message, for student performance events and regular classroom activities. Students respond positively to the diversity within the assigned curriculum and consequently experience other disciplines' perspectives on language learning and socio-cultural content.

A second example is a personal one, me serving as a summer tutor of a student since 2nd grade and now about to enter 12th grade. He struggled in 2nd grade with the basics of math and reading. With activities based on the community for numeracy and the use of subject-matter level readers for literacy, the student acquired the needed numeracy and literacy skills, supported by content from other fields. Jump to one summer from middle school, reading reputable local and national authors that few teens could relate to, the student struggled. Based on the next year's reading curriculum, the student read scaffolded and adapted texts that addressed the same human, social, or moral struggles in relatable contexts for the student. Another summer, he examined critical race studies based on an upcoming U.S. history course, in the midst of polemic race-focused current events in the country, where the student read scaffolded, above-level texts and listened to media-recorded lectures on current occurrences and related them back to topic-related, at-level history texts. Now, in high school, science courses are the struggle. Again, based on the coming-year science course syllabus, study sessions presented readings, assignments, in-home hands-on labs, and a field trip for real-life application of all content. Throughout all the years, the student received support and learned content from the identified subject, but the student also experienced the voice of experts from different disciplines working together for a broader understanding, used approaches to incorporate knowledge from different disciplines, and identified an application based on synthesizing other knowledge.

## Conclusion

By offering students the opportunity to make connections between disciplines, they obtain a new and distinct way of understanding content and the world. In essence, they may approach the same problem or project differently, which offers an innovative way of learning that encourages collaboration, development of critical thinking skills, and realistic opportunities for growth. And the youth will not only navigate the world, they will better direct it.

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## The Author

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