The Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers

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Present the :

Linking Second Languages Research and Practice Series

In this Issue:

Content-Based Instruction: What Can We Learn from Content-Trained Teachers' and Language-Trained Teachers' Pedagogies?

Research study by Stella Kong*****

Identifying pedagogies that support content and language learning as observed with two content-trained teachers and two language-trained teachers in their content-based second language classrooms

Reflect - What experiences do I bring to reading the research?

1. How do I integrate language expectations into content area teaching?

2. How do I contextualise language learning for my students?

3. How do I balance content and language learning?

4. How do I provide increasingly challenging language use in a content area subject?

What experience do the researchers bring to conducting the research?

Introducing Stella Kong

Stella Kong is an Associate Professor in the Department of English in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. She has been working as a teacher educator since 1992. She specializes in immersion teacher education. Her teaching and research interests are in immersion education pedagogies, content-language relationships and writing-to-learn across the curriculum. She has extensive experience working with English immersion teachers in Hong Kong. She has recently been working with English immersion teachers in Xi'an, China.

A conversation with researcher Stella Kong, author of

Content-Based Instruction: What Can We Learn from Content-Trained Teachers' and Language-Trained Teachers' Pedagogies?

Where did you conduct your research? With whom?

I conducted the research together with a colleague in Hong Kong and Xi'an (a city in north western China). We both work as teacher educators in Hong Kong and our main research and teaching interests are in immersion education pedagogies, specifically how content and language can be taught and learnt at the same time.

In Hong Kong, immersion education takes the form of late immersion, with one-quarter of secondary school students studying subjects across the curriculum in English, their second language. Subject-trained teachers teach these subjects through English but training for immersion teaching is voluntary. Chinese, their first language, is still studied as a subject. All students study through Chinese in primary school and study English as a subject.

In Xi'an, some schools are experimenting with content-based language teaching, with the aim to improving students' English proficiency, particularly oral English. The CCUEI (China-Canada-United States English Immersion) Project was initiated in 1997 for this purpose. The experiment started at the kindergarten level and gradually progressed up to some middle schools. In 2004, when the data of our research were collected, there were 3 middle schools participating in content-based language teaching. These schools only teach one subject, which is a school-based subject outside the Ministry of Education curriculum, in English for two lessons a week. English teachers are responsible for the teaching.

Late immersion teaching in Hong Kong and content-based language teaching in middle schools in Xi'an is therefore a very interesting research topic for us. We mainly worked with the teachers in these schools.

What were you trying to find out?

Our main interest was to find out how content and language can be taught and learnt at the same time in content-based language classrooms in different contexts.

In this particular paper, I wanted to find out the pedagogies for content-language teaching used by teachers of rather distinct training origin. The Hong Kong teachers are trained to teach content subjects such as science, geography, history. Their major concern is inevitably how well students learn the subject content. In fact, their performance is assessed by how well their students score in their subject and the scoring system focuses much more on the content than the English.

The Xi'an teachers are trained to teach English and most find it hard to teach a subject at the middle school level. They find the subject content difficult to handle and students can ask subject-specific questions to which they do not have answers. Their performance is assessed by their students' English proficiency level.

So how will these teachers approach content-language teaching? Will they focus on one at the expense of the other? For those who understand that both content and language are important, how will they handle the teaching? What pedagogies can be effective for content-language teaching?

How did you gather your information?

We observed and videotaped these content-based language lessons. When possible, we tried to observe and videotape a few consecutive lessons. We provide training to these teachers, so we actually know the teachers we observed and videotaped, which I hope made it less intrusive. Generally, the teachers we observed did not have much problem with us being there.

We also interviewed the teachers after the lessons to collect information about their thinking and views in their planning, teaching and evaluation of the lessons.

What did you do with the data?

We transcribed the lessons videos and the interviews. Then we read the transcripts, sometimes together with the videos of the lessons and the audios of the interviews, to look for the pedagogies used for teaching content and language. Then we organised the information we got into sensible categories to make better sense of it.

How would you summarize what you found?

We found that subject-trained teachers tended to focus on the content, naturally. When they found the language difficult to deal with, some would switch to students' mother tongue to help. But they rarely simplify the content. They felt that it's important that students learnt the content.

Language-trained teachers tended to simplify the content to make the language accessible or to ensure students learnt the language. They tended to require students to use more language in class and to build in more teacher-student and student-student interaction in class for the purpose of language learning.

For content-language learning to take place, it is important that the content is not simplified because it's the increasingly complex content that requires the use of increasingly complex language. When the content is simplified, the language stays at an easier level, resulting in students practising known language rather than learning new or more language.

To deal with challenging content and thus the correspondingly challenging language, a planned approach to content-language teaching and learning is necessary. Some teachers use knowledge relationships such as classification, cause-effect, comparison-contrast to help them plan the content and language teaching. The knowledge relationships require higher-level learning because they focus on relationships between facts and ideas, which require understanding, rather than isolated facts, which rely more on memory. Once the knowledge relationships are identified, the corresponding language can also be identified. For example, for the language of classification is used to represent the knowledge relationship of classification; this language can be 'xxx is classified into yyy groups by the features of zzz'. In other words, the knowledge relationships act as a bridge for content and language and connect the form-function relationships.

Because the content is complex, teachers need to find ways in their teaching to help students explore the content in-depth through multiple revisiting of their learning. When students have to use the language of the content (e.g. the language of classification to explore classification) to explore the content from different perspectives in different activities a number of times, this will help them use the language multiple times to learn the content, thus achieving the goal of content-language learning.

What practical messages come from this study?

In content-based language teaching, and arguably in all language teaching, an increasingly demanding content can lead to increasingly demanding language use, therefore securing a progressive path of language learning and development for students. Also, it is the content that contextualises the language learning and makes the language learning meaningful. Contextualised and meaningful language use is a key factor of successful language learning.

Careful planning for integrating content-language is important. Start with the content needs, plan for the content learning objectives, identify the knowledge relationships involved in the content learning objectives, and then identify the language of these knowledge relationships. This can be a way to connect content and language teaching.

What next?

1. What do I want to learn more about? How can I do that?

2. How could I structure my lessons to better take advantage of content- based language instruction?

3. How can I monitor my own language use?

Additional Research Articles

- Pessoa, S., Hendry, H., Donato, R., Tucker, G.R., & Lee, H. (2007). Content-based instruction in the foreign language classroom: A discourse perspective. *Foreign Language Annals, 40*(1), 102–121. Through classroom observations, analysis of teacher language, teacher interviews, and student writing assessments, Pessoa et al. compared the teacher language of two Grade Spanish classes to find that the focus of the content could lead to a lesser focus on language, which had a negative impact on students' language learning.

- Stoller, F.L. (2004). Content-based instruction: Perspectives on curriculum planning. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *24*, 261–283. This article provides an overview of studies of content-based instruction. In particular, it reviews student outcomes and curricula models.

- Swain, M. (2001). Integrating language and content teaching through collaborative tasks. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, *58*(1), 44–63. In this article, Swain examines pedagogical strategies to enhance French immersion students' outcomes. More specifically, she investigates how content-based collaborative tasks that focus on language can provide opportunities for second language learning. Swain outlines practical implications and suggestions to organize such tasks.