Content-based ESL instruction and curriculum.

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Abstract

This article discusses necessary paradigm changes in English as a second language (ESL) education from an oral English proficiency orientation to an academic English proficiency orientation. English learners face difficult challenges when asked to perform academic tasks in their less developed language. Content-based ESL instruction, which integrates language instruction with content areas, can meet both the linguistic and academic needs of English learners. Thus content-based ESL instruction offers a more meaningful path to academic language acquisition. The article presents theoretical, pedagogical, and empirical reasons why content-based instruction is more beneficial for English learners.

Introduction

Communicative language teaching, which stresses meaning over form, has been the mantra in English as a second language (ESL) education. This approach is skill-based and task-oriented; ESL instruction and curriculum are driven by language functions and forms based on the functional-notional approach (Bruton, 2002; Kidd, 1996). English learners in the traditional ESL class practice, for instance, how to politely apologize or disagree, to accept invitations, or how to talk to the doctor (Brown, 2004b; Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). In addition, they develop functional literacy through activities such as writing letters or personal stories. They also usually read short stories written exclusively for English learners. The orientation of the ESL class is largely geared toward building English learners' conventional English. It must be noted, however, that the nature of reading and writing tasks in traditional ESL classes is short, controlled, contrived, and watered-down, and student learning is isolated from the general education curriculum content. This results in a disjointed, superficial, and inauthentic curriculum. In the meantime, the biggest change in ESL education has been the student body itself. Demographics of the English learners have changed dramatically within the nation. From 1991 to 2001, the ELL enrollment in public schools in the United States increased by 95 percent while the general student population increased only 12 percent (Padolsky, 2002).

While current accountability measures stress English learners' academic achievement, it is troublesome to think that we as a society produce a group of students who are only equipped with conversational ability and basic functional literacy (Early, 2001). A critical need is academic language development, the language of subject matter content. A better ESL instruction and curriculum model is the one that provides English learners with academic

language development by integrating language and content (Brown, Park, Jeong, & Staples, 2006; Chamot, 2004). Based on theoretical, pedagogical, and empirical perspectives and evidence, this article discusses the rationale behind the content-based ESL instruction approach as a better way of helping English learners effectively acquire academic English.

Content-Based ESL Instruction

The idea of content-based instruction is not new. Since the early 1980s, there have been continuous efforts to help English learners achieve academic success by linking content learning and language (Pohan & Kelly, 2004). A steady stream of discussion about English learners' needs in academic language and different instructional models has been presented to enhance English learners' language learning or accelerate language acquisition (Krashen, 2003; Short, 1993; Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). These models, however, are usually employed in adult ESL settings found in English language institutes or college ESL classes, not k-12 public school settings. Thanks to Cummins' (1981) distinction between social English and academic English, ESL teachers of k-12 settings in particular, have become more conscious of the fact that social English competency alone does not help English learners achieve academic success. For example, English learners' ability to apologize cannot support them academically when they need to compare and contrast, define and discuss, and analyze and synthesize in subject matter classes (Brown, 2004a).

Empirical Findings

First of all, evidence supporting the use of instructional models that integrate subject matter and language can be found among immersion programs. Dual immersion program models in the U.S. in particular are designed to teach native English speakers a second language and non-English speakers English through subject matter learning. For instance, English-speaking students learn science in Spanish and Spanish-speaking students learn math in English. Montecel and Cortez (2002) conducted a study that examined 10 exemplary bilingual programs across the nation. They found that English learners in bilingual program consistently performed higher on an English test. Their pre--and post-test gains on the English Brigance were significantly higher than the comparison groups of English learners who received ESL services only and who were placed in English submersion (in English submersion classes, all subject matter classes are taught in English without accommodations for English learners).

Although dual immersion programs are a bilingual education model that takes advantage of the native languages of both majority and minority language students, the underlying principle of dual immersion programs is to teach a second language through content. Another study (Senesac, 2002) conducted in Chicago compared achievement scores of all students from a dual immersion school to those of the Chicago School District and of the State of Illinois. Data show that all students from the dual immersion school performed either at an equivalent or higher level in reading, writing, and math, when compared to students in the district and state.

Canadian immersion programs designed to teach English-speaking students French through subject matter have been shown to be effective (Swain, 1985). English-speaking students in

French immersion programs consistently acquire equivalent or higher levels of competence in the second language, French in this case, than non-immersion students in k-6 settings (Dube & MacFarlane, 1991). Many studies also report that English learners in sheltered subject matter classes learned as much as or more second language than the students in traditional ESL classes (see Krashen, 1995). Sheltered instructions are designed to teach English learners subject matter areas such as social studies or science in English by content experts or the mainstream teachers through scaffolding and accommodating strategies to reduce language barriers (see Krashen, 1995).

College-students enrolled in English for specific purposes (ESP) or English for academic purposes (EAP) demonstrated that, without any syntactic and discourse grammar lessons, they produced more grammatically accurate sentences from pre--to post tests. These students also used fewer compound sentences, while increasing the use of complex sentences (Burger & Chretien, 2001). Students' reading and writing was shown to be improved as well. Kasper (2000) reported that ESL students in her community college demonstrated statistically significant improvement in reading and writing in that 73% of the students skipped at least one English level. ESL university students in sheltered psychology class performed equally as well as students in advanced language course in listening and reading comprehension (Edwards, Wesche, Krashen, & Kruidenier, 1984). Lightbown (1992) noted that English learners in French language school demonstrated significant gains in oral communication compared to the control group. These students did not receive any formal language instruction and they read books in different topics. As discussed, strong evidence show that content-based ESL help English learners gain academic language proficiency.

Theoretical Reasons

Content-based ESL instruction is consistent with several related theories about language acquisition. As noted above, it is consistent with the view that there are different proficiencies of social/conversational and academic English. English learners quickly gain social English proficiency; however, face-to-face conversational English is not sufficient for them to function academically in subject-matter classes where tasks demand predominantly decontextualized English (Cummins, 1996).

Content-based instruction is also consistent with the theory that language structure and language in general are acquired through comprehension, that is, when students understand messages (Krashen, 1985). According to Krashen, the only path to second language acquisition is through comprehensible input, not conscious grammar learning based on form-focused instruction. He posits that ESL classes that promote second language acquisition focus on meaning not form. English learners in content-based ESL classes naturally and incidentally acquire English and its structure because they comprehend the language expressed in content-related concepts. Thus, if English learners are to be proficient in academic language, different kinds of comprehensible input have to be provided. That is, academic discourse patterns that English learners encounter need to mirror those of math, science, and social studies. For instance, English learners will better comprehend a sentence such as Juan has two fewer apples than Maria does if they had been exposed to mathematical expressions such as fewer/than, less/than, or greater/than within content-specific instruction (in this case, math) by their ESL teacher.

Accordingly, comprehensible input based on content, not grammar, will accelerate second language acquisition processes because language learning is meaningfully induced while English learners are guided through conceptual learning. The main focus of grammar-driven instruction is to have English learners engaged in drilling target grammar points and perfecting them in an unnatural way. With content-based instruction, English learners acquire the language that comes with the content.

Pedagogical Reasons

Content-based ESL instruction is not only theoretically justified, but it is also pedagogically sound. There are a number of convincing reasons as to why ESL instruction should switch gears and integrate content into language teaching pedagogy. The following explanations are not an attempt to provide comprehensive lists but to show multiple benefits of content-based ESL instruction for English learners.

* The fact that students are learning authentic content can be highly motivating, especially for older students who will appreciate the fact that what they are learning in ESL class is relevant to their academic success and will make them better prepared to handle class work in the mainstream (Wiesen, 2001).

* The reading included in content-based ESL instruction will help students acquire technical vocabulary unique to content areas, as well as the grammar used in academic language (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

* Content-area reading and class discussions will provide background knowledge that English learners often lack in content areas, and that knowledge will make mainstream classes more comprehensible (Brown, 2004a).

* The content presented in content-based ESL instruction is cognitively demanding, and the higher-order thinking and problem-solving nature of content-based ESL instruction will result in cognitive growth, which is an additional benefit beyond linguistic development (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

What Does Content-Based ESL Instruction Look Like?

Diverse models exist, including Sheltered, EAP/ESP, and thematic-unit based models. Sheltered instruction (Krashen, 1995) mirrors the mainstream curriculum in K-12 settings, and content-area teachers instruct math, science, or social studies to English learners with modified materials to accommodate their linguistic needs. The name 'sheltered' connotes that this model is more concerned with providing a learner-friendly environment. Otherwise, it would be very difficult for English learners to master subject matter in the mainstream through the medium of English,. It is important to note that the focus of sheltered subject matter teaching is content, not language, while EAP/ESP heavily emphasizes grammar and specific registers essential to content in fields such as economics or engineering. Thus, the EAP/ESP model was developed to help adult English learners who are preparing to gain admissions to higher education in the U.S.

The most well-received content-bases ESL instruction in the public school setting is the thematic-unit based model (Brown, 2004a; Crandall, 1993). An important component of content-based ESL instruction is the use of thematic units that revolve around one specific topic. Thematic units are designed to explore each theme thoroughly instead of "covering ground." If, for example, the theme is "community," English learners study about their own and other's families, different family structures, different occupations, what a community consists of, how to become responsible citizens, and what a community has to offer to its citizens. While studying theme-related topics, English learners practice a series of related learning strategies, which are critical in academic learning. English learners learn how to use selective attention and self-monitoring for reading comprehension, how to classify information before summarizing, and how to use advance organization as a writing strategy (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). As the instruction progresses, their learning becomes more in-depth (Chamot, 1995). In addition, English learners are presented with more opportunities to acquire academic discourse.

There are diverse ways to design thematic units. ESL teachers can select a unit based on students' interests and their personal backgrounds and choose authentic texts that are comprehensible to their level of English. Or, ESL teachers can choose a unit based on the mainstream curriculum (see Brown, Park, Jeong, & Staples, 2006).

Operational Issues

This paper has presented reasons why the field of ESL education should seriously consider the use of content-based ESL instruction. As mentioned earlier, content-based ESL instruction is not a new phenomenon; it has been around for more than two decades. Why then is it still considered to be a 'new approach' within the field? Why has it not become the norm in the ESL classroom? The reason content-based ESL instruction has remained outside the realm of reality is that it is difficult to implement. Pre-service teachers are not necessarily taught how to implement content-based ESL instruction in their teacher education programs. This means that ESL teacher preparation programs have to provide more pedagogical and practical knowledge regarding the implementation of content-based ESL instruction.

In addition, in-service teachers are reluctant to implement content-based ESL instruction because they are not comfortable with the idea that they have to teach subject-matter (Brown, 2004b). However, ESL teachers in content-based ESL instruction are not meant to be licensed experts. They are only 'borrowing' content to teach language more effectively to English learners. They can begin by teaching in a content area in which they feel most comfortable. For instance, they can adapt a unit from social studies if they feel more comfortable with social studies, as long as they can make it interesting and comprehensible. They can become an "expert" in one unit of any subject and gradually expand their repertoire.

Some critics of content-based ESL instruction have faulted it for focusing too much on content and not enough on language (e.g. Gersten & Baker, 2000; Short, 2002), calling for much more explicit or direct teaching of academic language. Some researchers, indeed,

appear to regard direct teaching and conscious learning as the only means of language acquisition (e.g. Pica, 2002; Schleppegrell, Archugar, & Teresa, 2004). Thus, a middle ground approach that targets the even treatment of content and language is recommended. In other words, ESL teachers in a balanced content-based ESL instruction classroom teach concepts and facts related to subject matter learning; but at the same time, they provide sufficient comprehensible input for language acquisition to take place. For example, the teacher in the balanced content-based ESL instruction would repeatedly use the core language structures related to a subject matter area in context so that English learners comprehend the message as well as the language structures. Since content-based ESL instruction activities usually require interactions among students, English learners will have to use the language orally or in writing in order to complete the tasks. The ESL teachers in a balanced content-based ESL instruction classroom would not be engaged in drilling grammar points as happen in traditional ESL classrooms. The purposeful use of language in context combined with content learning will guide English learners to language acquisition.

Conclusion

Traditional ESL class instruction mainly targets explicit grammar teaching through activities and drills. Consequently, it does not contribute to the acquisition of academic English. Since English learners acquire oral English in a short period of time, the focus of ESL education needs to be on helping ELL learners improve academic language proficiency. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which emphasizes ELLs' academic language proficiency, adopting content-based ESL instruction seems more important than ever. The time has come for the field of ESL education to give content-based ESL instruction a serious try. As discussed, content-based ESL instruction is anchored firmly in second language acquisition theories and pedagogically needed for English learners. Most importantly, empirical findings show that content-based models are more effective than traditional ESL teaching. ESL instruction based on content seems to not only satisfy traditional ESL educational goals of communicative competency in social English and functional literacy, but to exceed them.

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