

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING THROUGH CONTENT

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Abstract: Most linguists will agree that the natural process of language development does not happen in isolation but through a process of understanding the socio-cultural surroundings. Traditionally, second language education is taught in isolation where the focus was on grammar. Research has since found that language is learned most effectively for communication and purposeful social interactions. The merging of purposeful meaning with language allows for the student grasp onto a tangible topic not only helping to further language development but also cognitive development. Cummins discusses this idea of content language learning by separating language tasks as either context reduced or context embedded. Context reduced tasks lacks meaning for communication and is not cognitively challenging. On the other hand, context embedded tasks provides meaning for communication and requires in depth analysis. Merging content with language education requires students to not only learn the content information but to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). The academic application of the language being learned makes the language useful and applicable allowing for greater retention of the language. Past research has also shown that English Language Learners lack native like proficiencies due to the over emphases on grammar. In order for content language education to work, content cannot supersede language goals. Language functions such as grammar, vocabulary, and writing are taught alongside content in a way that makes sense for that topic.

Introduction

What we do with language varies context-to-context and task-to-task because language is largely a socio-cultural phenomenon. However, current English language instruction, both at the national as well as international realm, focuses mainly grammar using repetitive grammar exercises as means of instruction. Current curricula in English as a Second Language classroom are designed to teach English as a separate subject focusing on grammar. Most English language classrooms are designed in such a way where there is no link between English and the authentic language used in content classes or for academic purposes. Because of this, academic language is a serious problem for many international students when they begin college (Shi and Beckett, 2002). Many students graduate from secondary school having completed their English language exam yet possess little knowledge of the English language aside from what is required of them from repetitive grammar drills. As with the case in Hungary, many English Language students pass their English language exams but still lack the ability to accomplish English language tasks required for university courses. The teaching methodology employed in Hungary, focuses on teaching English grammar and students are seldom given the opportunity to practice conversation nor are they exposed to authentic English language.

Past research have shown that “teaching ESL students advanced literacy and discipline appropriate language is better done through authentic subject matter content rather than ‘dry run’ practice” (164). Repetitive grammar reviews lacks authentic application and often, students will memorize grammar tenses without really understanding them and without practical application, the retention rate is much lower. There is also a lack of exposure to advanced literature in most English language classrooms causing a rift between what students are taught and what they are expected to know on an university level. When students participate in English courses at the university level, the content dramatically differs from what they were exposed to on the secondary educational level. As in the case of Hungary, English language exams at the secondary educational level consists mainly of grammatical multiple-choice questions. On the contrary, at the university level, students are immediately required to read, analyze and translate advanced university level text. Most students feel inadequately prepared and overwhelmed. Students are never taught cognitive language skills so instead of being able to decode and break down the text for comprehension, students look up individual words in the dictionary, which often gives them the incorrect definition of the word, and they are left with incoherent, isolated words.

This discrepancy between what is taught in the classrooms and the practical application of the English language is what will be addressed in this paper. The content integrated approach to English language education has its roots in Systemic Functional Grammar first made popular in the 1960s by Michael Holliday. Content-based language teaching was afterwards introduced in 1986 by Bernard Mohan's "Language and Content." While content integrated language education is slowly finding roots in the United States, using content to teach English is still a very foreign concept in most of the rest of the world. Language is a social phenomenon and is influenced largely by our environment and because of this, language should be taught pragmatically for social functions through content integrated curriculum. The goal of content integrated language education is to make meaning available to all students and it is key to both develop academic language as well as valuing the prior knowledge students bring with them into the classrooms. As Halliday (1989) points out,

Language is a political institution: those who are wise in its ways, capable of using it to shape and serve important personal and social goals, will be the ones who are "empowered" (to use a fashionable word): able, that is, not merely to participate effectively in the world, but able also to act upon it, in the sense that they can strive for significant social change (p. x).

Content integrated English language education is the means to which students can be empowered. When instructors utilize prior knowledge, they are able to facilitate language comprehension by helping students derive meaning through the process of placing text within a framework of what the students are familiar with. The integration of content into English language lessons allows for students to connect language to its practical applications in their subject classes, which helps to both infuse meaning into language as well as provide scaffolding for their other classes.

Theoretical Framework:

Content integrated English language developed from Functional linguistics as opposed to rational linguistics, which governs much of Chomsky's theories on innate language knowledge. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) or Systemic Functional Grammar, which was first introduced by JR Firth, a British Linguist and then later developed by Michael Holliday in "An Introduction to Functional Grammar" in the 1960s. The SFL approach to language education focuses on the practical uses of language rather than the analysis of grammatical language and is mainly concerned with how meaning is construed through spoken conversations and written texts. SFL sees language in a social context where the function of language is central to language development and calls for insightful analysis of text and discourse from a social perspective.

Method of Studying:

The method of study employed for this paper is a qualitative study. The qualitative study allows me to explore in depth the responses of the participants to provide an analytical perspective on the issue. This study does not provide any general quantitative results, only to gain a deeper understanding of the educational system in Hungary from the perspectives of university students in the country.

Sampling:

This study first started with two groups of English language students in a high school in Queens, New York. There were 20 students in one class and 24 students in the other class and both classes functioned under the newly developed, content integrated curriculum. The second half of this study focuses on twenty English language students at the University level in Hungary.

Data Analysis Processes:

The first half of the study focuses on the content integrated English language approach as a new method of instruction at Grover Cleveland High School in Queens, New York. Three different classes of students in the ninth and tenth grade participated in this program. Twenty to twenty five students were assigned to each class with two teachers per class, a content specialist and an English language specialist. The study follows the progress of these students for two years. The idea of the content integrated method is that ESL specialists work in collaboration with the content teacher. While the content teacher focuses on the specific academic objectives that need to be met, the ESL teacher identifies the language support needed in order for the students to comprehend the content information. At Grover Cleveland, the program was modeled after theories developed by Lilly Wong Fillmore in which ESL teachers teach with Social Studies teacher in a small classroom setting of no more than twenty students during a two period block. In this classroom setting, students are encouraged to work in small groups. This allows for differentiation of instruction where students are grouped in accordance to their language ability. At the end of the two years, the students take the Social Studies High School Regents

exam and results of the ESL students in the content integrated classes were compared with results from students in regular ESL classrooms. There was a sixty percent increase in the regents passing rate for these students.

The second half of this study analyses the survey results of twenty English language students living in Hungary. While the students surveyed are all University level students, participants all attended different middle and high school and the survey results include both private and public schools in Hungary. For the first half of the survey, students were asked to give a rating, from strongly disagree to strongly agree, to statements. When asked if students had opportunities to practice speaking in class, 80 percent of the students disagreed and the same was true for the statement: "I felt that my English classes in high school prepared me for University level English reading and writing." For the statement: "Grammar was the main focus in my English classes in school," 100 percent of the students agreed. When asked if teachers used history, science, and math to teach English, 100 percent of the students answered no. Two of the twenty students answered yes to the questions: "Did teachers use real life situations to teach English?" and "Did teachers teach using real literature or real newspaper stories?" The same two students who answered yes to these two questions also had an overall positive experience in their English classes and felt that they were prepared for University level English.

For the second half of the survey, students were asked open ended questions for a more in depth qualitative analysis. Students were asked questions such as: 1. What usually was the focus of each class? 2. Do you feel that your English language education prepared you for University level courses in English or for applying for jobs in the United States? 3. What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of English language education in Hungary? 4. In your English classes, what did you feel you always wanted more practice in? For question number 1, most students answered that grammar was the primary focus of their English classes and students also agreed that their English classes did not provide them with many opportunities to speak and ask questions. Students also agreed that the English they learned was not too useful because there was "too much weight on grammar." For question number 2, one student's response was: "Not much. I've learned English in the Hungarian School system for 8 years, from which I had 4 years of intensive course in High School. But my 80% of my English knowledge arose from the Internet, jobs, films and series etc. Only 20% of it came from the school system." Another student reflected on their overall language education while in secondary school and wrote: "Practical and useful language knowledge can't be taught and learnt based on purely (or mostly purely) memorizing scientific grammar rules. Human cognitive behavior doesn't work that way. Expression and practice based learning is much more effective than this. On the other hand it's also a bad habit in Hungary that everything is about the paper. In this case, no one really cares about the real English knowledge, only about passing the state language exam. And the education is based around this only goal." Students all felt that while grammar was taught strongly, the rest of English language education was weak.

As for the question; "In your English classes, what did you feel you always wanted more practice in?" Most students answered speaking and independent thinking. After ten years of English language education, one student wrote, "When we were children and young, we were so shy and it was so easy just learning grammar and reading. But after, at university, when you meet with for example Erasmus student and you want speak with them...you can't, because your speaking skill is so low, and you feel you need more speaking practice." The overemphasis on grammar in the Hungarian Language system has for the most part, inadequately prepared students for high level, academic English language tasks. Some students had answered that they had been learning English for over ten years but felt overwhelmed and inadequately prepared for university level English courses; "At university the level is higher and more specific, the text are so difficult." The discrepancy between what is taught at the secondary level and what is expected of students at the University level is a major problem in the Hungarian English language education. Students are not exposed to authentic English language while in secondary school and feel unprepared when they enter university classes where they are suddenly expected to read, analyze, and translate university level text.

A Socio-Psycholinguistic Approach:

The meaning within text is the creation of both the reader and the writer. Letters and words on a blank page itself do not hold any meaning, rather, it is the reader's interaction with the text that gives it meaning. In the transactional socio-psycholinguistic approach proposed by Goodman, he writes; "texts are constructed by authors to be comprehended by readers. The meaning is in the author and the reader. The text has a potential to evoke meaning but has no meaning in itself" (Goodman, 1994). The reader plays a highly active role in the process of comprehending text where the significance that the reader brings to the text is as important as the text itself. The cultural backgrounds that each student brings into the text aids in his or her comprehension of the text. Acknowledgement of this prior knowledge not only helps facilitate the comprehension of the text but also empowers students by valuing what they are able to contribute.

With a focus on the holistic approach to teaching English as a second language, the transitional socio-psycholinguistic approach encourages students to find meaning in text rather than solely focusing on what each individual word means within a text. In other words, it's a top-down and whole-to-part approach, rather than a bottom-up, part-to-whole approach. According to Constance Weaver, author of *Reading Process and Practice*, this approach enables meaning to emerge "as readers transact with a text in a specific situational context" (Weaver, 2002). Students are able to derive meaning from text by placing words, phrases, or sentences, within a particular context that they are already familiar with. This context, however, needs to be activated prior to the reading of the text as well as during the reading of the text by the educator. The activation of prior knowledge is necessary in order for students to make personal connections with the text to ensure comprehension. If there is no prior knowledge or schemas in place, it must be built. Once the schemas are in place, meaning will become a transaction between the reader and the words in the text (Weaver, 2002). Along with developing schemas, students need to be explicitly taught how to extrapolate meaning from text via context clues, how to make predictions and inferences about and within the text, and how to make text-to-self connections.

Within the curriculum and the transactional socio-psycholinguistic approach to literacy, a comprehensive literacy program must be developed. Drawing from Constance Weaver's thoughts on literacy, the socio-psycholinguistic approach encourages a curriculum that incorporates a number of different reading and writing strategies that would aid in literacy development such as: read/write aloud, shared reading/writing, the guided reading/writing, sustained readings, and writing workshop. The reading and writing segments would incorporate the more holistic approach to literacy that Weaver argues for and would enable students to become more motivated, independent readers. Under the principles of the socio-psycholinguistic approach, students are taught to learn the parts of a language while immersed in the whole. Students are able to learn skills such as phonics and decoding while reading in context.

In the article: "Quality of Children's Recall under Two Classroom Testing Tasks: Towards a Socio-Psycholinguistic Model of Reading Comprehension" by Mosenthal, research testing was done on various groups of students to understand the involvement of the socio-psycholinguistic model in reading comprehension. Children use four types of meaning while decoding reading material. One type is referential meaning, which is the literal interpretation of an external discourse. The second type of meaning is a text-structured meaning, which includes both logical inferences and enabling inferences. The text-structured meaning of reading comprehension states that students draw meaning from readings through logical inferences and reasoning to make the literature coherent. The third type of meaning is pragmatic inference meaning, which is based on understanding of the literature through world knowledge and not necessarily from the interpretation of the actual text. The last type of meaning is social meaning, which involves the comprehension of the text through the process of communication.

Students will use different meanings within the classroom when decoding the reading material because children understand social meaning differently. The first reason why children understand social meaning differently is because of the different expectations placed on the students by the teachers. The second reason is due to the fact that students themselves have different expectations for themselves. Testing results in informal situations shows that; "in informal testing tasks, the manner in which children relate new knowledge and schema knowledge depends upon how children comprehend social meaning and interact with their teacher." (Mosenthal, 1980) Language, therefore, rather than being something that can be taught in isolation, is instead something that is interdependent upon the society, culture and educational contexts.

In the article, *the World Outside and Inside Schools: Language and Immigrant Children*, Guadalupe Valdes argues that the social context in which language is taught plays a critical role. At Garden School where Valdes' conducted her study, students were given very little time to practice their oral communication skills and were not taught basic expressions for functioning in the classroom (Valdés, 1998). They were also given tasks inappropriate for their age, dumbed-down material and activities void of any academic language and content. For example, "students would examine a picture, fill in the blank in each sentence, and color the picture of the boy" (Valdés, 1998). Students were also given worksheets to complete but were not given explicit instruction. The teachers at Garden School did not provide native language support or acknowledgement of the students' cultural background in their curriculum. As a result, students became frustrated, unmotivated and restless. If Garden School had a curriculum in place that acknowledged the cultural and linguistic background of the students, that incorporated meaningful activities and engaging literature and texts, gave ample instruction time for teaching the specific skills needed for academic growth, and had sufficient non-standard assessments in place; the students would thrive, would develop the necessary literacy and academic skills to succeed in school, and would be more motivated. In addition, there also needs to be open communication between ESL teachers and the content-area teachers so that the ESL teachers can provide the necessary instructional support to keep students academically up-to-par with their contemporaries.

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Classroom Applications and the Role of the ESL teacher:

Critical pedagogy that empowers rather than disable students utilizes the transactional socio-psycholinguistic literacy approaches through comprehensive reading programs and engaging curriculum to create a better educational environment for students. Assessing prior knowledge and choosing text connected to content are two essential elements to foster an empowering environment for comprehension of reading assignments. To access prior knowledge, teachers can utilize a range of activities. A quick activity can be writing down a question related to the text on the board and asking students to think about and respond to it. As the students are writing down their answers, the teacher should walk around the class reading the responses and selecting students to share allowed. Students are given the opportunity to first think about the topic and write down their thoughts before having to speak out loud allowing for the quiet and shy students to participate. The teacher is given the chance to select the answers to be shared out loud, guiding the students to the text. Another way that teachers can help access prior knowledge is with a more involved activity such as a KWL (what do you Know, what do you Want to know, and what have you Learned) chart. Students are asked to complete the first two parts, what do you know and what do you want to know, prior to the reading. Students will share their answers and then complete the last part, what have you learned, after reading the text.

In the process of accessing prior knowledge, the teacher is first of all, validating the student's knowledge and cultural background. Students not only become invested and engaged in the lesson but also empowered to voice their thoughts and opinions. Motivating students to tap into prior knowledge also enables students to better understand the text. Students make connection between what they know and what they are expected to learn filling the text with meaning. Questions and vocabulary will often arise during this phase providing instructors the opportunity to further scaffold the text.

The second crucial classroom practice is selecting content infused text to teach literacy skills. Content rich lessons provide students with meaningful text to exposure academic language that is applicable in their other subject classes. Past research also show that English Language Learners lack native like proficiencies due to the over emphases on grammar and struggle in mainstream classes because the academic language is too challenging. This is why ESL teachers must expose students to academic language in ESL classrooms so that the students can excel when they are in mainstream classes. However, in order for content language education to work, content cannot supersede language goals. Language functions such as grammar, vocabulary, and writing must be taught alongside content in a way that makes sense for that topic.

Well-developed ESL-content lessons must incorporate both English language goals, as well as content goals. Each lesson must have a content objective and a language objective that matches the content objective. For example, if the content objective is teaching the role of Gandhi in India, then the language objective can be the use of cause and effect phrases to write complex sentences. It would not be effective to teach the future tense during a history lesson on what happened in World War II. Taking the example: "The dog walks down the street," if the language objective is to teach the simple present tense, then a better means of achieving this objective could be through a social studies lesson on the current political parties in the United States. The grammar objective of the simple present tense would be taught through sentences such as: "Even though the current president is from the Democratic party, the Republicans holds the majority of the seats in the congress." A content focused English language lesson serves to meet three purposes. First of all, students are able to access prior knowledge to better understand the text. In the example above on political parties, if the student has any prior knowledge about politics and political parties, then they are able to use that knowledge and apply it to the lesson. Secondly, students are taught academic language helping them succeed in their content classes. English language classes can provide the vocabulary to help scaffold comprehension in their regular social studies or science classes. Lastly, content focused English language lessons utilize age appropriate material to teach the language. Rather than dumbing-down the material, which makes students feel stupid, content focused lessons

uses grade appropriate material using the same text and vocabulary as their peers in regular, mainstream classrooms.

In developing content related ESL lessons, it is essential for ESL teachers to work alongside content area teachers to define the content objectives and figure out how language can be used to help achieve the content objective. The ideal arrangement for a Content English Language classroom would be a co-teaching environment where the content teacher and the English language teacher are both in the classroom teaching together. Curriculum, lesson plans, assessments and evaluation of the students' progress are all discussed and planned together so that both content objectives and language objectives are being met.

Conclusion:

It is through education and knowledge that a person can be empowered and it is the job of the teacher to empower our students to think critically on their own, to understand, analyze and evaluate the world they live in. To be effective teachers, one must first learn to understand where our students are coming from, their culture and backgrounds. Teachers must first learn about the students, to appreciate and value the knowledge that each student brings to class in order to effectively utilize our students' knowledge to teach them. Too often, students are not given the chance to access their prior knowledge. The knowledge that students hold in their experiences in life are not valued nor utilized in classrooms. Instead, we teach them to study and memorize obscure facts that are not related to their understanding of the world. Without making the connection between what they know and what they are learning, students are not able to see the importance and the value of the lesson. Learning is a process of understanding and interpreting the information presented to us, which cannot happen if students are taught to just regurgitate the information teachers give them. The process of knowledge acquisition therefore requires tremendous scaffolding so that students are not receiving the information superficially but understanding it in depth. Students must see the relevance of the information to their personal lives, which happens when teachers access prior knowledge to help students connect the lesson with what they already know. Bridging the gap between language acquisition and content information allows students to see the relevance of the language in practice. As ESL teachers, it is our duty to both value our students' diverse backgrounds as well as guide them towards success in their subject area classes.

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