

Integrating Foreign Language and Content Instruction in Grades K-8

HELENA CURTAIN, MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS & MARI HAAS, TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Content-based instruction is a method of teaching foreign languages that integrates language instruction with instruction in the content areas. In this approach, the foreign language is used as the medium for teaching subject content, such as mathematics or social studies, from the regular classroom curriculum. The method is receiving increasing attention because it allows schools to combine the goals of the second language curriculum and the regular curriculum, making language learning the vehicle for strengthening general skills and knowledge. "Language is not just a medium of communication but a medium of learning across the curriculum. The goal of integration is both language learning and content learning. Content-based classrooms are not merely places where a student learns a second language; they are places where a student gains an education" (Mohan, 1986, p. 8).

Not only does the content-based language class complement the regular classroom curriculum, it becomes an integral part of the entire school program. The success of language immersion programs (where subjects are taught entirely in the foreign language) has stimulated interest in using content-based learning in other types of elementary and middle school foreign language programs that have traditionally been organized thematically around vocabulary topics. Incorporating subject content in early language programs puts language into a larger, more meaningful context and provides situations that require real language use. Genesee (1994) suggests that traditional methods often disassociate language learning from the rest of the student's day as well as from cognitive, academic, and social development. Content-based instruction is part of an integrated approach that brings these domains together. The benefits of studying language through subject content are evident in students' language and content acquisition.

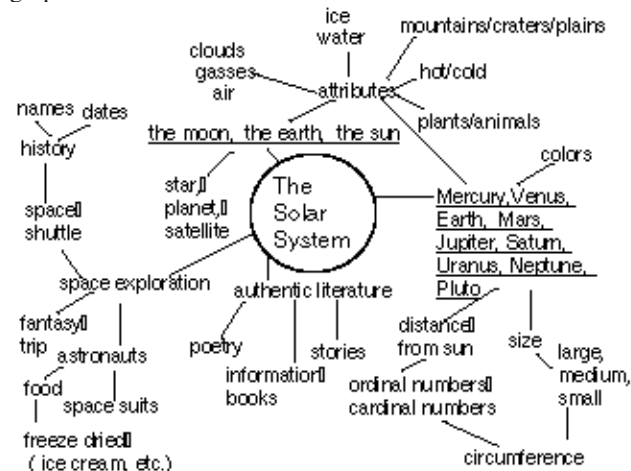
In content-based instruction, students become proficient in the language because the focus is on the exchange of important messages, and language use is purposeful. The language that students use comes from natural situations, such as a science unit on the solar system or a social studies lesson on the geography of a country.

Planning for Content-Based, Thematic Teaching

In thematic teaching, the curriculum is organized around a thematic center that can originate in the classroom, the school, the environment, or the target culture. Activities that teach language concepts along with the content are interrelated and are planned to fit within the framework of a lesson or thematic unit. Such an integrated, holistic approach is based on the premise that when students are engaged in meaningful activities they acquire language, including writing, as naturally as they learned to walk and talk.

The thematic center may be a curriculum area, such as the Middle Ages; a word like "inside"; a theme such as houses; or a story in the target language. Webs or semantic maps are an ideal way to brainstorm curriculum activities based on these themes. A web graphically shows how the activities and the target language are interrelated. Caine and Caine (1991) indicate that facts and skills presented in isolation need more practice and rehearsal to be stored in the brain than does information presented in a meaningful context. The web maps out the context in which second language learning is combined with subject content and cultural learning in an integrated language process. Webs can be organized in different ways (e.g., free form, by content discipline, by multiple intelligences). The following web and chart are examples of thematic or content-based planning.

graphic: A Free-Form Web



sidebar: Planning a Unit on Puerto Rico Using Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1993)

Bodily-Kinesthetic. To introduce vocabulary about Puerto Rico, ask the students to take a picture or item representing something about Puerto Rico out of a magic box. Ask students to point to the item, pass the item, put the item on the table, put it on a part of the body, etc.

Spatial. Give students a graphic organizer with a circle in the center that says "Puerto Rico" and spokes coming out from the center. Have the students fill in each spoke with one aspect about Puerto Rico.

Linguistic. As students take each item out of the magic box, describe the item to them. "This is a coquí. It is a small frog that only lives in Puerto Rico. It sings, 'coquí, coquí, coquí.'" Write a Language Experience Story about Puerto Rico using the language used to describe the items from the magic box.

Musical. Teach the song El Coquí to the students.

Logical-Mathematical. Have students use a small picture of a coquí to measure the distance between places on the map (1 coquí=10 miles) and calculate how long and wide Puerto Rico is, how far it is from Ponce to San Juan, etc. *

Interpersonal. Divide the class into pairs with one partner as A and the other as B. Give each pair an A and B pair sheet. Have them "read" their sheets to each other to practice the vocabulary illustrated on the sheet and to decide if their sheets are the same or different.

Intrapersonal. After tasting typical foods from Puerto Rico, make a graph of the food students like and dislike.

*activity by Eileen Lorenz, Montgomery Co. Public Schools (MD)

Pesola (in progress) has developed a curriculum planning framework for the integration of language and content based on the thematic unit. In her model, the dynamic relationships among language, academic content, and culture interact so that all three elements form the core of the language lessons. She describes a comprehensive framework to follow in the planning process, including (1) a thematic center; (2) outcomes for language in use, content, and culture; and (3) activities, assessment strategies, materials, and classroom setting. Making choices in all three areas of language, content, and culture, and maintaining a balance among them is the fundamental basis of this model.

Part of Pesola's framework is the Unit Plan Inventory, which is outlined below. It shows the many aspects of planning that must take place for successful language and content integration in a unit on architecture.

sidebar: ***Planning for a Content-Based Unit on Architecture Using the Unit Plan Inventory***

Language in Use. Describing, giving information, asking for information.

Subject Content. Architecture, geography, seasons, weather.

Culture. Doors and windows of a target country and students' home town.

Vocabulary. Colors, shapes, sizes, materials (wood, stone), architectural details (ironwork, balcony, ornate), geographical terms (snow, rain, sun, clouds).

Grammatical Structures

- Verbs in command form--open, close, touch, point to.
- Verbs in present tense--to be, to see, to think, to paint.

Essential Materials

- Photographs from both target and home cultures of doors and windows, geographical landmarks, and seasons.
- Paper, ruler, tape measures, paints, markers.
- Map of target country.

Activities

- Introduce vocabulary through Total Physical Response (TPR) sequence with photos of classroom doors and windows.
- Sort photos by doors/windows, target country/home town, size, shape, material, color.
- In pairs, estimate then measure doors and windows in classroom.
- Use TPR sequence of map geography, seasons, and weather of target country and home town.
- In small groups, paint the original window with a view in the target country or home town.
- Describe a window in writing or orally.
- Display windows in the classroom, have students choose the window they like the best and write why they like it.

Assessment

- Observe students' participation, assess for understanding.
- Observe students' participation, assess for accuracy and pronunciation.
- Assess for participation, use of target language, and accuracy.
- Assess for inclusion of all elements, presentation, and participation in group project.
- Evaluate written paragraph for accuracy and meaning.
- Evaluate student writing for coherence, interest, and accuracy.

Based on and adapted from a unit prepared by Pam Morgan, Renbrook School, West Hartford, CT.

Suggestions for Planning Lessons that Integrate Language and Content Instruction

When planning for the integration of language and content instruction, the distinctive characteristics and needs of young students found at each level of cognitive and educational development must be considered. Who are the students? What is the range of their social and cognitive development? What are they interested in? Second language acquisition research informs us about the value of teaching strategies such as providing comprehensible input, planning many listening activities, and giving the students numerous opportunities to use their language and to negotiate meaning.

The following are suggestions for planning lessons that integrate language and content in early language programs:

1) Become familiar with the regular classroom curriculum by observing your students' regular classrooms, reading the school's curriculum guide, talking with the teachers about their curriculum and to the students about what they are studying.

2) Plan to integrate content that you are interested in and will take time to research. Start on a small scale and select only one or two topics from the regular curriculum. Think in advance about the units you would like to plan so that when you are traveling or attending conferences you can begin to collect resources to enrich your units.

3) Use a web or a curriculum planning format that promotes the integration of language, content, and culture.

- 4) Design interesting activities for the students that do the following:
- use the students' prior knowledge and personal experience;
 - ask students to work in a variety of groupings (whole class, individually, in pairs, and small groups);
 - use holistic strategies that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing and naturally connect language and content;
 - challenge the students to think critically; and
 - address the students' multiple ways of learning.

Conclusion

Incorporating content-based instruction into elementary and middle school foreign language classrooms is a way of providing a meaningful context for language instruction while at the same time providing a vehicle for reinforcing academic skills. Teaching through content is fun and worthwhile for both the students and the teacher. Although it takes more time to plan and create materials for content-based instruction, the results are well worth the effort.

References

- Caine, R. N., & Caine, G. (1991). *Making connections: Teaching and the human brain*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences: The theory in practice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Genesee, F. (1994). *Integrating language and content: Lessons from immersion* (Educational Practice Report No. 11). Santa Cruz, CA and Washington, DC: National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.
- Mohan, B. (1986). *Language and content*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Pesola, C. A. (in progress). *Background, design, and evaluation of a conceptual framework for FLES curriculum*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.