Content-Based Instruction: An Effective Approach to Teaching ELLs

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Chapter I

Introduction:

There are a few different terms used to describe a student that is learning English as a second language. They may be referred to as ELLs or English language learners. They are also referred to as ESL students, English as a second language students, and LEP or limited English proficient. The subject area is known as ESOL, English for speakers of other languages, ESL, English as a second language, and EFL, English as a foreign language. EFL instruction has been conducted classically since the 19th Century, using such methodologies as the Grammar translation method, Audio-lingual methods, and (TPR) Total Physical Response (Veigarsdottir, 2009). These well researched methods have worked for years so why an abrupt shift to content based foreign language instruction now? There has been a sudden increase of immigrants to United States public schools in the last ten years. It was documented in the annual flow report for 2009 from the Office of Immigration Statistics, that 74,602 refugees were admitted to the United States on temporary refugee status from other countries all over the world in 2009. In 2008, there were 60,107 and in 2007, 48,212 (Martin, 2010). Additionally, “the number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in January 2010 was 10.8 million” (Baker, 2011). Henceforth, the regular public school classroom is often a mixture of several different cultural backgrounds and may have many students whose first languages are not English. There is ever increasing pressure for schools to meet goals in AYP, or annual yearly progress, and ELLs are negatively impacting schools’ abilities to meet these goals. Therefore, many researchers consider content-based instruction to be an effective and realistic way to teach English by combining language and content learning (Heo, 2005).
Chapter II

What is Content Based Instruction?

Content-based instruction (CBI) is the practice of teaching English for ELLs through cross-curricular content areas. Content-based instruction principles are linked to the assumption that the focus of instruction should be on the subject matter and not on the language form (Dueñas, 2004). The language used in CBI is discourse-based, draws on integrated skills, and is purposeful or meaningful (Heo, 2005). Content based ESL classes differ from regular content area classes in several ways. There are specific language objectives and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) enrichment opportunities that extend the opportunities for ESL students to learn content while they are acquiring language skills. Secondly, the content is specially designed, or sheltered. For example, a teacher may be teaching a unit on U.S History and may spend more time on the vocabulary through the use of a graphic organizer to bring visual connection to the content. The teacher may have the students role play certain events so that the student’s comprehensible input of the content is greater. "CBI supports ELLs' achievement of the TESOL standards (1) by integrating language and content learning, (2) by addressing the language domains of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; (3) by providing support for various English language proficiency levels" (Boyle, Peregoy, 2008, p.79). The main characteristics of Content-Based instruction are:

- English is taught through content areas such as Social Studies, Science, Math, and Literature selections.
- The lessons include metacognitive activities that build on previous knowledge.
- Students make meaningful connections to the content that motivates them to learn.
The teacher provides support throughout the lesson with the use of visuals, realia, technology, or through group interaction.

- CALP is developed along with BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills).
- Students work with language based on authentic materials.
- The units are usually organized into themes (Veigarsdottir, 2009).

Content-based instruction includes the use of many different strategies and concepts. The development of basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) are key components of CBI. The principles of implementation and instruments of assessment are discussed in the following sections.

**BICS and CALP in Content Based Instruction for ELLs**

According to second language theorist, Cummins, second language acquisition is distinguished by two different areas, social fluency, or basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency or CALP (Cummins 1999, Montgomery, 2008). It is especially necessary to develop proficiency in both areas for students in the middle and secondary grades. BICS can usually be established within two years but developing CALP, or academic proficiency, can take anywhere from 5-10 years (Montgomery, 2008). Traditional methods of foreign language instruction have generally done a great job of fostering basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), but do not always address the language that is needed for instruction or academic language. ESL students often have a difficult time taking standardized tests because of the directional language that is used such as generalize, infer, predict, summarize, formulate, and support, just to name a few. Words such as these are essential for ELLs to learn in order to gain cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). One of the greatest advantages of Content-based instruction is that it provides many
opportunities to build CALP as well as BICS for ELLs through the use of many different strategies used in presenting the content materials to ELLs.

Implementation of Content Based Instruction

Content-based instruction is implemented by creating thematic units that span core academic curriculum areas to increase comprehensible input in the content area. It is important for teachers to consider linguistic as well as cultural objectives when planning content-based lessons (Heo, 2005). The main strategy for making the content comprehensible is by adding various different supports such as visuals, graphics, illustrations, media, technology, realia, dictionaries, timelines, graphic organizers or flow charts, using peer support and groups, native languages, and role playing. These are by no means the only strategies available but this is just a beginning idea of what kinds of activities lend themselves well to content-based instructional practices. These are the kinds of supports that serve as avenues to make the content comprehensible and meaningful to the English language learner.

Collaboration

Collaboration is peer cooperative learning. It is a natural human process to seek information from others when one does not have the answers. Essentially, collaboration in the ESL classroom is creating opportunities for students to share their knowledge base with other students to enhance comprehension and critical thinking skills. Pairing or grouping students with peers stimulates active cognition, promotes oral fluency, and increases literacy development (Shang, 2006). Research supports that significant improvement in student learning exists when students work in groups that integrate structured objectives, have common group goals, provide potential benefits, promote individual responsibility, and offer each member of the group an equal opportunity for success (Dueñas, 2004, p. 77). Using collaboration in content based
instruction makes the students active participants in what is being learned. The students, themselves, become powerful resources and contain a wealth of background knowledge (Baba, Ishii, 2003). Collaboration also creates a favorable environment that lends itself easily to student-centered assessments. In essence, the students become peer evaluators in a content-based learning environment. When learners are able to evaluate themselves or others in a meaningful manner, they become more aware of problematic areas in language learning and become actively participating members of their own learning process.

SIOP – Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

The SIOP model “was developed to help make content material comprehensible to English language learners” (Haynes, 2004). It maintains that building background knowledge is the foundation for creating comprehensible input (Dueñas, 2005). Under the SIOP model, teachers plan opportunities for explicit instruction, use a variety of questions that promote higher order thinking skills, and employ multiple scaffolding techniques throughout the lesson (Haynes, 2004). Lessons are designed in accordance with cross-curricular content areas that are tested by the English Linguistically Simplified Assessment (ELSA/TCAP). Consequently, research maintains that SIOP is an effective model for content-based instructional practices in ESL.

Assessment of Language and Content in CBI

Assessment is a necessary part of the language learning process. There are many ways to assess an English language learner in content-based instruction whether it is a formal examination or a self-reflective individual assessment. Mainstream teachers can differentiate assessments for ELLs by providing testing accommodations such as:

- Reducing test questions or content material that is tested
- Using a version of the test with simplified English
• Simplifying directions
• Reading aloud the test questions
• Allowing more time to complete a test
• Supplying word banks for tests
• Using matching activities
• Chunking questions or material
• Using peer interpreters
• Oral assessment of content instead of written
• Use of student portfolios for assessment (Haynes, O’Loughlin, 2004)

It is important to work with mainstream classroom teachers and foster positive professional relationships in content-based classrooms. It takes a lot of time and work on the part of both the ESL and regular classroom teachers but, ultimately, the ESL students will benefit from the teacher collaboration efforts (Heo, 2005).

Authentic Assessments

Authentic assessments are classroom-based assessments. In order to be effective for content-based instruction, assessments should be directly aligned with the standards and instructional goals, should consider student diversity, be collaborative by providing students the chance to evaluate themselves, be based on observations of students working, and should be multi-dimensional or use a variety of instruments (Boyle, Peregoy, 2008, p. 109). One practical design is a student-based assessment that makes the students an active part of their learning. It asks them to self-reflect and assess their own progress in learning. Students can also be a part of the evaluation process for their peers.
Standardized Assessments: ELDA and ELSA/TCAP

The use of norm-referenced standardized examinations is still one of the main instruments used by national standards to measure benchmarks in achievement. Some advantages of using standardized assessments are that they can be quickly adopted and implemented, have objective scoring, and can be used for benchmark assessments in comparison with other institutions (Johnson, Prus, 2004). At present, there are two main instruments that are used to assess ELLs in Content-Based instructional practices in the state of Tennessee. The English language development assessment (ELDA) is used to measure English proficiency and the English Linguistically Simplified Assessment (ELSA) is used to measure content knowledge in Tennessee public schools. Both are aligned with content specific objectives in the four areas of Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics and are focused toward teaching English having been taught using content-based instruction in ESL (Tn.gov, 2009). The ELDA and ELSA are further discussed in the next section.

ELDA Assessment for Measuring Content Based Instruction for ELLs

The English Language Development Assessment (ELDA) is used as a means to measure the yearly progress of proficiency gained in the four domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening for each individual ESL student (Nixon, 2011). ELDA assigns a score of 1-5 for each of the four domains, 1 being for non-English speaking and 5 being fully proficient. It is also used to understand in which domains the student is weak and helps to guide teachers in creating appropriate interventions for the LEP student. The assessment determines when a student is ready to exit the ESL program. ELDA is loosely aligned with curriculum objectives that encompass broad content areas taught in grouped grade levels (ie., 6-8, 9-12). So the ELDA test is not truly content specific. It is also NOT looked at as a means for measuring AYP in an
individual school. The purpose of ELDA is not to serve as an appropriate instrument to consider the effectiveness of content-based instruction for ELLs but for measuring language development and proficiency standards.

ELSA Assessment for Measuring Content Based Instruction for ELLs

The English Linguistically Simplified Assessment (ELSA) is the Tennessee (TCAP) standardized achievement test in a simplified form of English. It is administered differently than TCAP in that the students are read aloud to for all portions of the multiple-choice test except for the language portion. The students are also allowed more time to complete the test than the TCAP allots. The ELSA measures student achievement in the four main content areas: Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. The test was designed to measure student performance in the state content standards. The Tennessee Department of Education has adopted content standards that are specific to each grade level and the ELSA is aligned with these standards (Nixon, 2011). It is only taken by LEP students in grades 3-8 (Tn.gov, 2009). The characteristics that set the ELSA apart from the TCAP are that it reduces wordiness, uses high-frequency or common words, uses concrete words, not abstract ones and uses the simplest verb forms to reduce complexity of sentence structure (Nixon, 2011). Because ESL students must take the ELSA from 3rd grade until 8th grade and the majority of their performance is measured through this testing instrument, it would be advantageous for ESL teachers to teach using content-based instruction for the curriculum content areas that are addressed in the ELSA to improve annual yearly progress (AYP) scores in the Tennessee public school setting.
Chapter III

Summary:

Research supports that Content Based Instruction (CBI) is an effective way to teach students learning English as a second language within the United States public school setting (Dueñas, 2004). Creating thematic or content based units makes the content that is being taught more meaningful because the content is supported in various ways throughout the entire unit. The students are reinforced through the ability to study different subjects in a comfortable environment. The student can take more time and receive extra support through multiple scaffolding type strategies to learn the difficult vocabulary or concepts associated with the content. Then when the student is in the regular grade level class with other students, they demonstrate more confidence and mastery in the classroom due to the supplementary content based thematic instruction in their ESL classes. Key linguistic, cultural, and grammatical issues are also incorporated within the lesson through a variety of activities based on the content. Collaboration and sheltered instruction (SIOP) are also necessary components for properly implementing effective content-based instruction in the ESL classroom. There are several types of effective assessments that can be used for Content-based Instruction. Student-centered or authentic assessments are especially helpful to reinforce language and content learning. The English Linguistically Simplified Assessment or ELSA version of the Tennessee Standardized test, TCAP, is aligned with content objective and standards of the regular course content area. Research supports that ESL curriculum that is delivered in a content based framework is more widely beneficial for English language learners in the public school setting and leads to higher achievement scores on standardized assessments (Montgomery, 2008).

Conclusion:
Content-Based Instruction has been put into practice over the last few decades in a variety of language learning contexts. CBI is believed to better reflect different learners’ needs in preparation for core academic courses (Heo, 2005). Most of the case studies regarding content-based instruction that have been reported in North America support that content-based instruction has proven to be a valuable approach to language teaching at all levels of instruction (Dueñas, 2005). The ELSA assessment, implemented in Tennessee, helps validate the use of content-based instructional practices as an effective means to teach ELLs in the public school setting.
References:

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