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Content-Focused Classrooms and Learning English: How Teachers Collaborate

This article looks at the possibilities of content-based instruction in mainstream English secondary schools. It considers the continuum from a language to content focus in classrooms where teachers collaborate. English as an additional language (EAL) and subject curriculum teachers work together to support young people while they simultaneously study the national curriculum and learn English. The article argues that although teachers in the partnerships consider the relationship between language and content for their students, the lack of an EAL or language curriculum presents few opportunities for language learning or language awareness. With the balance clearly in favor of content, there are negative knock-on effects for the EAL teacher and English Language Learners (ELLs).

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Background

IN ENGLAND, THERE IS NO POLICY that supports an integrated language and content curriculum for learners of English as an additional language (EAL). By policy, I mean an officially endorsed body of classroom materials, resources, and pedagogies for the teaching of the curriculum at different stages of English language development. Because of this, we do not share with most other content-based approaches a theoretical or empirical assumption that content and language create a symbiotic relationship (Stoller, 2008). What we do have in England is a utilitarian approach that conflates language and content as an efficient way of providing concurrent learning in two areas. English schools are an essentially sink-or-swim environment where language acquisition is meant to happen through inclusion into the unproblematic mainstream classroom, where all students supposedly have access to a full and rich curriculum (Leung & Creese, 2008).

Inclusive education for all has been stressed as a cornerstone in British education policy for

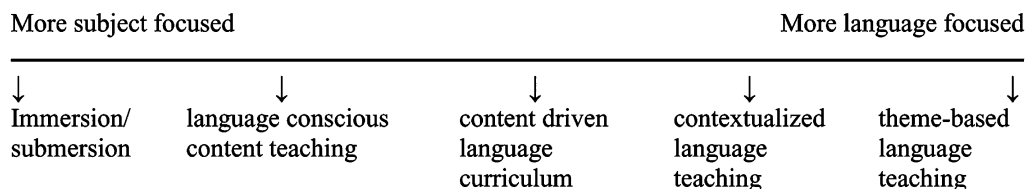


Figure 1. The continuum from more subject focused to more language focused curriculum.

school-aged children over many years. As a consistent educational policy since at least the 1980s, inclusion has shaped decisions, values, and the practices of classroom life. The inclusion of ELLs into this paradigm is designed to allow them open access to a full and rich curriculum. The inclusion paradigm stands in direct opposition to withdrawal approaches that are viewed as exclusionary and discriminatory and as offering an impoverished curriculum (Reid, 1988).

Inclusion policies are viewed as progressive, promoting equal opportunities while recognizing individual differences. Policy argues that all teachers are responsible for all students. Students learning EAL, therefore, are the responsibility of classroom teachers of subject curriculum. However, policy has historically recognized that teachers will need to collaborate with other specialists to enable them to respond to the needs of ELLs. Teacher collaboration between a classroom teacher and an EAL specialist teacher has had long-term policy support in England as an educational intervention in addressing the needs of young people learning English as an additional language in school classrooms (Department of Education and Science, 1985; OFSTED, 2004). It is one example of inclusionary measures to make the mainstream a place where the EAL learner can learn both English and subject content.

Content-Based Instruction

Stoller (2008) defined content-based instruction (CBI) as “an umbrella term referring to instructional approaches that make a dual, though not necessarily equal, commitment to language and content-learning objectives” (p. 59). Davison

and Williams (2001) suggested that CBI enhances “language learning while not interfering with subject matter learning” (p. 53). Crandall (1987) similarly suggested that, in education, it makes sense to focus “on the ways in which the language is used to convey or represent particular thought or ideas” (p. 4). These might include vocabulary specific to different subjects, as well as discourse expressions typical of particular genres. Mohan (1986) proposed integrating content and language through the use of knowledge structures that tie language expressions and curriculum content together. These might include sequence and description, classification and evaluation.

Davison and Williams (2001) conceptualize language and content integration as a continuum ranging from contextualized language teaching to language-conscious content teaching (see Figure 1). They reject the term *content-based language teaching* because it conflates a number of different models and approaches with different emphases. Stoller (2008) also spoke of a content-driven continuum with varied configurations. Immersion is placed at one end which, like Davison and Williams’ model, is described as content-driven with learning conceptualized as subject matter primarily through the medium of the target language. At the other end are theme-based courses and language programs with stronger commitments to language-learning objectives. What CBI approaches share are “strong academic orientations, emphasizing the linguistic, cognitive, and metacognitive skills as well as subject matter that students need to succeed in future educational endeavours” (Stoller, 2008, p. 59).

Stoller (2008) argued that “The integration of content and language-learning objectives presents challenges for policy makers, program planners,

curriculum designers, teachers, materials writers, teacher educators, teacher supervisors, test writers, and learners” (p. 65). One of these challenges is the design of appropriate tasks. Not only do proponents of CBI need to balance a focus on form with a focus on meaning in integrating content and language, but they also need to create suitable content materials with a language focus in the first place. Two further challenges described by Stoller (2008) are “(a) the selection and sequencing of language items dictated by content sources rather than predetermined language syllabi, and (b) the alignment of content with language structures and functions that emerge from the subject matter” (p. 65).

Others have pointed to the challenges that CBI place on teachers. Pica (2008) acknowledged the increasing skills demanded of teachers working at the interface between language and content. She pointed out that teachers are being expected to increase, expand, and evolve their responsibilities in relation to English language learners (ELL), finding themselves responsible for both the subject and linguistic/communicative needs of their students.

World wide, teachers are confronted with the responsibility to teach classes of students who must acquire knowledge and skills in science, technology, business, and telecommunication, and do so through a language of which they know very little, or nothing at all. (Pica, 2008, p. 76)

In my own work, I have focused on CBI in mainstream contexts in which two teachers collaborate and, like Pica, have described some of the difficulties that teachers face in making inclusion meaningful and productive for ELLs. In my research, I have shown how pedagogies that are perceived as highly effective in the education literature and used widely among language professionals (e.g., scaffolding, making form-function links, noticing gaps in input, providing opportunities for negotiation) are perceived as less important than the content teachers’ pedagogical practices. The undermining of the language teachers’ contributions to language and content teacher partnerships marginalizes not

only the language teacher, but also the students who are supposed to benefit from the language teachers’ contributions (Creese, 2002, 2005b). Such research documents the difficulties of implementing CBI through teacher collaboration in mainstream school classrooms.

In the rest of this article, the focus is on how EAL teachers and content teachers can best work together to make content accessible to ELLs. Several concrete examples are presented to illustrate this (Creese, 2005b). These examples come from a geography classroom in a secondary school in London. I wish to make several points from these extracts. First, opportunities to collaborate between teachers are rare given current school structures. Second, without such collaborative opportunities there is a danger that curriculum material might lead to simplified texts without any clear rationale for either content or language instruction. Third, teachers need to collaborate in order to find multiple ways to assist students in accessing meaning while learning English at the same time.

In the extracts below, a geography teacher was working with two EAL teachers because of the high levels of recently arrived students learning EAL in the class. However, the two language specialists were not in class at the same time and were timetabled to support the geography teacher and his students at different points of the school week. Below, we will look at interview data from all three teachers, as well as geography materials written by the geography teacher and adapted by one of the EAL teachers. The final geography booklet used in class was that adapted by the EAL teacher to make it easier for the 50% of newly arrived ELLs in the class.

A Year 10 Geography Class

In the first extract below, the geography teacher describes his role in class. He points to his expertise of the curriculum.

Well, I have expertise in terms of the curriculum, the syllabus, and so I am directing what we are going to study next and plan that in relation to the curriculum. (geography teacher)

The teacher described his primary expertise and classroom role in relation to the geography curriculum that he described as directing, staging, and planning. The interview extract shows his concern with delivering subject knowledge. This might be described as the *what* of teaching. It shows less concern with the *how*, or the pedagogical processes of enabling learning. There is little focus on language either in terms of language learning and teaching or on the particular genre of geography discourse. This stands in direct contrast to one EAL teacher's description of his role and expertise in class. In this short extract we see an entirely different focus.

Well, first of all, it is to assess the demands of a particular lesson in terms of language and in terms of content, the concepts, and see whether I can possibly get across a quite complex concept by simple means. (EAL teacher in the geography class)

This teacher focuses much less on a body of knowledge. Rather, he highlights the processes of accessing the curriculum through concept of *simplification*. His concern is on the *how*, rather than the *what* of the lesson. He sees his role as assessing and adapting the lesson to make it meaningful to students. He mentions dual aims of both language and content.

In addition to asking the teachers to describe their own roles, I also asked the teachers to comment on how they saw their partner teacher's role in class. Interestingly, in the extract below, the subject teacher picks up on his partner teacher's ability to quickly assess and adapt.

Graham [the EAL teacher] is extremely good at just adapting. You will see him pick up a topic that you are doing, write a few words, photocopy it, and come back with it. (geography teacher)

The subject teacher's focus on adapting and the light-footed response of the EAL teacher also appears to stress the *how* rather than the *what*; that is, the pedagogy rather than curriculum. In the next extract, the geography teacher describes the benefits of support. He reinforces his view

that his role is teaching the curriculum, and the EAL teacher's role is to provide support around learning. The subject teacher is there to teach the many; the EAL teacher is there to respond to the needs of the few.

If there are two of us, I think it is a lot easier to achieve that aim because you can help them quicker. And also the support teacher will guide the weaker pupils a lot more and I will just be there for general queries, but they will probably help the weaker child a lot more. (geography teacher)

I have written elsewhere in full about the implications of this attitude and the dangers of equating EAL with special educational needs (SEN; Creese, 2005a). Above, I use the extract to make the point that subject teachers are orientated to a transmission pedagogy that is focused on delivering the curriculum, whereas the EAL teacher is focused on facilitation pedagogy and on learning, rather than teaching. The extracts from both the EAL teacher and the subject teacher show themselves as having different roles in their collaboration. In the extract below, the EAL teacher speaks of the ideal and reality of teacher collaboration with their teaching partner.

Collaboration is knowing exactly what is going to happen and what your own contribution is going to be. So, basically, collaboration ought to be a situation in which the two teachers involved in any given lesson know precisely what is going to happen and precisely what their contributions are going to be. But that is in an ideal world. On the odd occasions when it does happen, it is very pleasing and you must have noticed that in Geography. We are producing the materials beforehand and, therefore, it works. But where we are working on an ad hoc basis, where you don't know what is going to be taught, it is very difficult to be prepared. (EAL teacher)

In this final extract, the EAL teacher mentions a rare opportunity to plan teaching resources beforehand for ELLs. In the next section, we will see examples of this planning. The EAL

teacher has taken a text originally written by the geography teacher and adapted it to make it more accessible for ELLs. Below, the different texts are compared and an argument is made that, although the different texts might be examples of movement along the continuum from immersion in the subject to language-conscious content teaching, the adaption does not constitute CBI. This is because the EAL and subject teachers do not have a clear curriculum focus. According to Davison and Williams (2001), in CBI, curriculum focus is a choice in emphasis that varies along a continuum from content (or subject matter) to language, broadly defined. In CBI, it is necessary to make a distinction between different types of content- and language-based curricula. The two texts below do not do this. Davison and Williams (2001) pointed out that curriculum focus is “defined according to the varied significance, depth of treatment and internal coherence of the language and content elements of the curriculum” (p. 59). We will see that, although language is seemingly simplified, the lack of a language curriculum focus means that the activity places the text and task still on the far end of a CBI continuum with its focus on content immersion. Thus in both texts A and B, a language learning focus is missing.

A Text for Language and Content Instruction

Below are two excerpts from two different texts used in the same year 10 (students aged 15) geography lesson. Text A is from a worksheet written by a subject specialist, the geography teacher. Text B is an adaptation of text A, written by the language specialist, the EAL teacher. Originally, both texts were available for students’ use. In fact, students, with teachers’ guidance, were expected to choose which text to use. In the end, the geography teacher decided that all students should use Text B, adapted and produced by the EAL teacher. The students were working on the Norfolk Broads, an area of natural beauty and environmental importance in the east of England.

Extract from Text A (written by geography teacher)

In Britain, people use the land for many different reasons. The land is a RESOURCE (something that people could use) for producing food, for building homes, offices and factories, or for RECREATION (spare-time activities). All these things change the ENVIRONMENT (surroundings) including the ECOSYSTEM (plant and animal life). But there are also natural changes going-on that can affect them as well. (Capitals and punctuation as in the original)

Extract Text B (written by EAL teacher)

Read

Land is a RESOURCE. It is used for lots of different things.

Land is used for growing food, for homes, for factories, and for offices.

Land is also used for RECREATION. People use the land when they are not working.

People change the land. When people change the land they change the ENVIRONMENT. The ENVIRONMENT is the things that are around us.

Part of the ENVIRONMENT that people change is the ECOSYSTEM. The ECOSYSTEM is Animals and Plants living together. People change the lives of plants and animals. (Capitals and punctuation as in the original)

A first glance shows that text B is longer than text A. However, although text B has more sentences than text A (11 sentences, compared to 3) these sentences are shorter (average 8 words per sentence for text B, compared with 20 for text A). The EAL teacher who made these adaptations appears to be attempting to strip all unnecessary language away so that students could reach the core meaning of the text. However, in doing so, fundamental changes in the linguistic code were made: For example, the determiner “these” does not occur in text B and is, therefore, not pointing backward to link what went before. Because of the fundamental relationship between form and function in language, what also changes is the meaning of text itself. In text A, each key word is bracketed with a simplified gloss, whereas in

text B the definition of the key word becomes the proposition of the sentence. This means that the cause and effect processes in the two texts are different. In text A, *All these things change the ENVIRONMENT*. That is, resources (and all examples given of resources) and recreation (and all examples given of recreation) are what change the environment. It is people that change the environment through their use of resources and recreation for a purpose, i.e., they do things. Text B, on the other hand, does not point to the rationale for people changing the environment. People simply do things to change the environment, seemingly without purpose. Text B does not make the link between people using the land as a resource and for recreation, which brings about change to the environment (*When people change the land they change the ENVIRONMENT*). In text B, people are behaving in an unexplained way, whereas in text A, they are making changes because of the benefits these changes bring. The main purpose of text B appears to be a set of definitions of key concepts. The main purpose of text A appears to be to show causality and effect.

I suggest that the two texts have different aims and functions. Perhaps at first glance, the adaptation of one text to another appears to be a good example of content-based language teaching, but I suggest that this adaptation is a much more complex matter. The structure of an academic text is important in organizing ideas coherently and logically. The way a sentence is linked backward and forward in the text is important in building up cohesive arguments. When these building blocks are changed, meaning is also changed. When grammar is simplified and vocabulary made easier, the relationship between form and meaning is changed. The linguistic changes from text A to B make causality less apparent. I would suggest that deducing the argument is actually more difficult in text B, rather than easier, because structurally, it does not build up and connect propositions.

Interestingly, in adapting text A, the two teachers (ST and EALT) appear to share a common agenda. That is, in the adaptation process, the focus remains on teaching subject knowledge rather than on the underlying process of

meaning-making, for example. *Knowledge* here is the learning of the geography curriculum. Both teachers are committed to teaching key geographical terms. This view of knowledge as the *what* rather than the *how* very much mirrors points raised by Lemke:

A lot of education today is still oriented to teaching students to read, write and use various kinds of specialised written materials, their accompanying diagrams, and sometimes mathematics. But we teach the content, not the medium. We teach students scientific and technical vocabulary, but we never point out how science systematically turns verbs into nouns and why it does so. We rarely if ever explicitly teach students how to talk science (Lemke, 1990) or how to write science (Halliday & Martin, 1993) and show them how it's different from (and like) telling a story or writing one.... No attention at all is paid in the curriculum to explaining how complex meanings are expressed by combining words and graphic images. Students desperately need to know how to critically interpret combinations of words, pictures, maps, diagrams and specialised symbolic expressions. (Lemke, 2002, p. 42)

Lemke draws our attention to the processes of meaning-making and the importance of teaching these processes to young people. He showed how an ability to process and critique discourse provides tools for understanding and exploiting language to make meaning that moves beyond the transmission of subject knowledge and key concepts. Lemke's argument is for an awareness of the pedagogic consequences of discourse and an understanding of language as meaning-making in process. In the adaptation process from text A to text B considered in this section, teachers missed an opportunity to consider causality linguistically, which was also a subject curriculum aim for geography.

Conclusion

Given the absence of an EAL curriculum in English schools, it is important to not unfairly chastise teachers for not paying more atten-

tion to language issues in subject classrooms. It is extremely difficult in the English context to introduce a language learning agenda into the subject classroom. Despite the pedagogic approaches particularly valuable for language teaching/learning as well as more generally, teachers often find using them in class very difficult. In this short article, I have presented data of interview extracts and adapted teaching texts that the teachers themselves saw as a positive example of teacher collaboration. I have shown the problems of making such adaptations. The teachers seemed unaware that changes to the text constituted changes in the task. Their focus on simplifying vocabulary meant the task changed its nature to a defining, rather than a cause-and-effect, task. However, teachers failed to exploit this.

In the absence of a language curriculum focus, we cannot say that text B constitutes language-conscious content teaching. What we can say is that the driving force and overarching commitment in the geography curriculum classroom is to subject teaching and learning. Subject knowledge continues to dominant with little room for a language agenda in the mainstream classroom.

Transmission of subject expertise, rather than pedagogic know-how, has higher status in our secondary schools and this will continue to marginalize the EAL teacher unless he or she is also seen to have an equivalent subject knowledge as is the case of special educational needs (SEN) in English schools. When a pedagogy is in search of a subject, it will drag expertise down to a skill, rather than a knowledge. In other words, unless the EAL teacher is seen as having the same skills as subject teachers in terms of both the *what* and the *how* of the curriculum, their status and role will be marginalized in the mainstream, alongside those with whom they work.

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