

Encounters of the Collaborative Kind: When SIOP Meets ECRIF

by Ching Ching Lin

As ESL teachers, we caution on the potential pitfalls of teaching content without building the language skills students need to succeed in content classrooms, college, and careers. Yet, the question of how we incorporate language support into content instruction in a meaningful way so that language learning is integral to students' overall learning experience continues to haunt us.

In today's ever-evolving classroom, where interdisciplinary collaboration provides a key to student academic success, the integration of language and content instruction becomes all the more important. According to Short (1991), an integrated approach involves not only the modification of language and materials in order to provide comprehensible input to ELLs in content classrooms, but also the incorporation of as much context as possible into content instruction to effectively promote purposeful learning (Short, 1991). SIOP (Sheltered Immersion Observation Protocol) and ECRIF (Encounter, Clarify, Remember & Internalize, and Fluently Use) are two instructional models that have been widely adopted as tools to integrate content and language. Each has its own unique strengths and potential weaknesses.

For teachers who work in school settings where collaboration is mandated, the SIOP model suggests a way to implement Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding (1978) in support of content-based instruction. Yet, using SIOP can be overwhelming for novice teachers, who have not yet mastered the skills of planning, structuring, and sequencing learning activities. By focusing on the process of how learners learn, ECRIF can be used to help teachers fine-tune lessons to better meet individual student needs.

SIOP

SIOP, which incorporates sociocultural considerations into the classroom instruction, is organized around eight components essential for making grade-level content accessible for ELLs and for helping them develop academic and language skills: (1) Preparation, (2) Building Background, (3) Comprehensible Input, (4) Strategies, (5) Interaction, (6) Practice/Application, (7) Lesson Delivery, and (8) Review/Assessment. As an instructional approach to help ESL teachers provide effective and comprehensible instruction to ELLs, SIOP has been widely adopted in schools that have enrolled a large number of ELLs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

While it does provide a consistent structure for lesson planning and delivery, the primary challenge of using SIOP derives from its being built on an idea of meaningful instruction. This idea, however, is vague and difficult to define, which makes it difficult to implement when used as a guideline to align language development with the standards or content that students are learning (Bertram, 2011). The unintended consequence is that you can have a lesson that incorporates many SIOP features but may still fall short of being an effective lesson for ELLs.

ECRIF

ECRIF, a framework of stages developed by Kurzweil and Scholl (2007), is gaining in popularity in ESOL teaching in adult education through SIT University's TESOL certification program. As a framework that focuses on how learners learn, ECRIF has been used as an approach for moving classroom instruction from teacher-guided lesson delivery to student-centered collaboration and independent practices.

To illustrate the instructional benefits of ECRIF to align language and content objectives, Brawn (2009) draws a distinction between two kinds of scaffolding: spontaneous and planned. While the former happens as a “necessary feature of the act of teaching and the process of learning,” a result of the “interaction between a learner and a more knowledgeable other,” the latter denotes the support that the teacher “builds into the productive skill lesson to facilitate the successful learning and use of the target language and/or target skill” (Brawn, 2009, p. 62). Brawn notes that the two notions of scaffolding complement each other, and the ultimate goal of scaffolding, according to Vygotsky (1978), is to create a habitus for learning where the productive use of skills develops naturally within the learner’s “Zone of Proximal Development” as the teacher gradually releases more controls to students (Brawn, p. 62).

Brawn’s notion of “scaffolding” is in line with Wiggins and McTighe’s “Backward Design” (2005) as a planning process to guide curriculum, assessment, and instruction. From this perspective, ECRIF can be incorporated into an instructional framework such as SIOP as a guide for planning learning experiences to facilitate students’ productive use of a target language. For example, think about a target language that you want students to be able to use in a real-life situation, and then ask yourself: What would be the series of activities that you need to put in place in order for the intended learning objective to be achieved? Through the stages of ECRIF, shown in Table 1 (Kurzweil & Scholl, 2007), teachers are guided to engage in the dual action of thinking through what students need to do in order to successfully use the target language while continuing to provide opportunities for clarification and feedback.

Table 1. The Stages of ECRIF

Stage	What the students are doing	What they may be thinking
E ENCOUNTER	=Students see or hear new language and realize they don't know something	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What's this?</i> • <i>I don't know this?</i>
C CLARIFY	= Students distinguish the meaning and use of the new knowledge or skill. They ask questions and think about what is correct.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Oh I see what it means.</i> • <i>Oh I see how to do this.</i> • <i>What's the difference between this and that?</i> • <i>Is this right?</i>
R/I REMEMBER & INTERNALIZE	= Students have a chance to move the knowledge or skill from short-term to long-term memory. They then can begin to personalize it and use it in different contexts. They connect it mentally to prior experiences with images, sounds, and feelings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Okay. I'm starting to remember this.</i> • <i>Okay. I've got it in this activity.</i> • <i>I'm making connection to my own life</i>
F FLUENTLY USE	= Students have a chance to use the new language to communicate their ideas. Ss work toward being able to spontaneously use the language in different contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Cool. I can use this skill or knowledge automatically.</i> • <i>This is for real-world purposes.</i> • <i>I don't have to consciously think about this.</i>

In addition to its use as a planning tool, ECRIF allows teachers to reflect on their teaching so that they can better address individual student needs. Through vertically aligning language learning with the broader learning objectives, it ensures students are well supported in their acquisition of essential skills necessary for their academic success.

Conclusion

While useful as a tool to guide instruction, ECRIF may not serve as a stand-alone methodology and is not intended to replace a comprehensive curriculum or instructional approaches such as SIOP that are grounded in broader sociocultural considerations. Incorporating ECRIF into SIOP as an additional layer of instructional support provides teachers a framework to coherently sequence activities and ensure that skills and strategies are properly introduced, reinforced, and assessed.

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