Connecting Language Objectives and Content Objectives: More Than LOCO Vida

by John Balbi

ESL teachers often ponder two questions during the lesson planning process: Do I teach language or do I teach content? Many struggle with finding connections between one and the other. When connections are made they are often at the surface level with either one or the other taking a secondary position.

In my work with first-year teachers and student teachers I have witnessed this struggle first hand. Lessons either focus entirely on language development with little emphasis on content or the focus is on content with little language development. One challenge is to understand the content and the direct and implied concepts that lie within content. The other challenge is to identify and develop particular language patterns, stems, and language functions. Thus the need to identify and plan appropriately for both the language objective and the content objective should be firmly established.

As teachers of ELLs we come prepared with the intuitive knowledge and logic behind the demands of language use. We examine the grammar rules, language functions and the lexicon with an enthusiasm that sets us apart from our colleagues who immerse themselves in content. And yet, as I read the language objectives that are submitted in pre-observation lesson plans and observe the language aims posted in many classrooms, I see only surface examples of that understanding. The same can be said for the content objective. Moreover there is often little or no connection made to the students' experiences.

To that end three fundamental questions need to be addressed: What are students discussing with each other? Why are they having the conversation? What English language structures and vocabulary are they using to have the discussion? The response to these questions becomes the foundation necessary when linking both language and content.

**What are the students discussing with each other?**

Students are discussing content; that is as content is identified by its specific relationship to broad areas of knowledge. Thus content is defined as a distinct discipline; that is mathematics is distinct from literature and so forth. In the classroom however, content is further defined by its academic language; that is, language used in the learning of academic content in formal schooling contexts; aspects of language strongly associated with literacy and academic achievement including specialized academic terms, or techni-

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cal language, speech registers, and
discourse related to each field of study.
Not included in this is the need to
include the conceptual framework of
each defined content area.

The definition of conceptual or
theoretical frameworks is a type of
intermediate theory that attempts to
connect all aspects of inquiry: for
mathematicians it is the science of
patterns; for historians it is the science
of skepticism; for authors of literature
it is the study of human nature and
significant human experiences; for
scientists it is the scientific method.
Thus to enable students to discuss
content they must be taught to think as
historians, scientists, mathematicians
AND authors of literature! This may
seem like a daunting task unless the
ESL teacher herself or himself thinks
this way.

Why are students having the con-
versation?

There is a great deal of importance
placed on teaching facts, formulas and
outcomes in order to be able to amass
the knowledge necessary for a written
response usually for an exam. How-
ever, the dark cloud of testing places
undue burden on both teachers and
students and these clouds rain uncer-
tainty over the conversation.

If there were a conceptual frame-
work for having the conversation it
would be to promote critical thinking
in a collaborative, communicative
atmosphere. Again, this may seem like
a daunting task unless ESL teachers
(and more importantly those who su-
pervise them) understand the funda-
mental difference between learning
facts of a particular content to regur-
gitate them for an exam and acquiring
an understanding of the content in
order to express an informed opinion
based on meaningful communicative
exchanges.

What grammar, language structures
and vocabulary are they using to
have the conversation?

The common view of grammar and
all that is associated with it for na-
tive speakers is that it is synonymous
with learning labels, such as predicate
nominatives of fragments, as well as a
list of errors to avoid. However, ESL
grammar is different. Just as ELLs
have a pronunciation accent when they
speak, their English also has a gram-
mar accent, which is a set of gram-
mar usages that do not sound like the
English spoken by a native speaker.
Thus teaching grammar should be ap-
proached as a distinct content and not
as an explanation of rules and relations-
ships between and among rules.

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