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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 conversation?

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. However, the dark cloud of testing places undue burden on both teachers and students and these clouds rain uncertainty over the conversation.

If there were a conceptual framework 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 supervise them) understand the fundamental 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 native 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 grammar accent, which is a set of grammar usages that do not sound like the English spoken by a native speaker. Thus teaching grammar should be approached as a distinct content and not as an explanation of rules and relationships between and among rules.

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