

Round Table *Content and Language Learning (Part 1)*

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AM: The title of our Round Table is Content and Language Learning, which is also the theme of next year's TESOL-SPAIN annual conference in San Sebastian in March, Content and Language Learning. The sub-theme is "two birds with one stone". Now, my question is: are we killing something? I would like to problematize content and language together, as if we could teach language without content or content without language, but for purposes of discussion, we'll pretend we can. Obviously, this is of great interest now in Spain and in Europe at present. Indeed over the past years, I have noticed an increase in the level of English language-speaking of the students coming to my university from Spanish schools, and I think we are going to look forward to increasing numbers of young people who are communicatively and linguistically competent in English and in other languages. However, will they have anything to say or write about? Will that be at the expense of any kind of other learning that goes on in school? So I'd like to play the devil's advocate here and ask the overall question of whether we don't lose something by gaining something. That is, the bilingual and plurilingual schools projects will mean a gain in language teaching and learning in

Spain, but will it mean a loss in terms of some other sort of learning happening in school classrooms? Can the focus be equally on both language and content?

DA: I think it is absolutely possible to very significantly improve the quality of language learning of the kind I think is worthwhile, as a result of not just focusing on language as a subject discipline, but of doing things with it, enabling people to talk about useful things – think about, write about, listen about. I've got direct experience relevant to this in a couple of ways. One is absolutely personal: that I learned language purely as a focus on language, as a subject discipline in school and I've been suffering major skills' deficit ever since because of that. So I can talk about lots of German things and French things, but I can't talk about them in German or French. I regret that very much. On the other hand, I've had almost no Spanish teaching and yet I once spent six hours travelling between Córdoba and somewhere else in Argentina and I talked for nearly six hours in Spanish with the taxi driver, because we had things to talk about. So, I'm a great believer in the value of content.

But, responding to the danger side of 'Can we give them equal weight, can we care about them both?', my first answer is that we don't need necessarily to care about them both equally. In different contexts, it may be that the language is more important or that the content is more important. If we need to care about them both equally, there is very clear evidence, and this is my second piece of direct evidence, that if it is properly done and well done, there are huge benefits on the language learning side. I just showed the group I was with in my session the hard evidence, which was test results. I mentioned a group that came to me from Switzerland, from a Swiss secondary school project in Zurich, where kids from the age of 14 to 16-17 had been working with English lessons continuing, and with English medium teaching of geography, history and biology. One ordinary secondary school class in a tripartite system, and there was not a single member of that class who was not at least C1 level across the whole range of skills; some were C2 level. Now, if you can get that kind of result without any additional teaching time, just different content in what was happening in the classrooms, then in terms of language learning, that's massive. I talked to the teachers who came with them and asked them if there was any deficit on the subject side and their answer was that the subject side was just as good. A second group came the following year, so I have anecdotal evidence from that one context, and I've got four or five other contexts that I've heard about and know about where it's clear that the subject teaching hasn't suffered and the language teaching has benefited enormously. However, that's where teachers are trained, well-resourced, and instruction is supported, the time hasn't been cut back, and so on and so on.

TG: I'm very optimistic about content-based teaching. Presently, I'm using a content-based model, that's from the United States, that's called SIOP, or Sheltered Instruction Observational Protocol. Just at the 40th TESOL Convention in Tampa, FL, there were 5 workshops dedicated exclusively to the SIOP model. It is the leading model in the United States, and this model is being applied to all levels, primary to secondary. The main objective is to both teach language and teach content without having either of those aspects suffer, teaching grade-level content too. What's involved with the SIOP model is an 8-step approach, which I'll briefly explain.

The first step is Preparation, setting Content objectives and Language objectives and identifying materials needed. This has a lot to do with your BICS and CALPS, your BICS being your Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills and CALPS, the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Skills. Why is that so important? Because when we get into content at a higher level, it's exactly the CALPS that we need to highlight, to pull out, to work with, and to help facilitate that to our students. So the preparation stage is setting the content, preparing material. Also SIOP promotes the use of lots of supplementary material. The next step is building the background, linking prior knowledge; they believe in always starting with what the students know and making a link. Then, third, comprehensible input, the idea that textbooks are always written for a general audience, that we have to adjust that. And not just the textbook input, but teachers' oral input; we have to make that comprehensible through slowing down our language, use of gesture, visuals, anything that will facilitate more comprehensible input. Also, use of charts, Venn diagrams, all that helps the student learn more. Fourth, strategies: metacognitive, cognitive, and social and affective strategies. Metacognitive: learning to learn, mnemonic techniques, using the mother tongue occasionally to bridge information. Any kind of cognitive strategies that help students learn: questioning, pre-reading strategies...anything that will help them facilitate that knowledge. Social and affective strategies, such as cooperative learning. Also the idea of Krashen's affective filter, lowering the filter, so making a comfortable,

stressless environment so that children can take in the language in a more natural way, through language acquisition.

Then, fifth, interaction: two types of interaction, which is really important: teacher-student interaction, because that's where they're going to get that comprehensible input. And then after they have that initial teacher-student interaction, then they have to have time for student-student interaction, always monitored. And then practice and application: time to practice what they've been taught. And, seventh, wrapping up the lesson, coming full circle, and reviewing the initial language and content objectives to see if they have been met or. Finally, review and assessment through observation, quizzes, tests; SIOP also promotes portfolios. I do believe that with this kind of model we can teach content and language simultaneously. But I think we have to change our approach in teaching.

TR: Two birds with one stone? Changing our way of teaching? I think really we can, we do – we are successfully doing this in the MEC bilingual project, with 22,000 children in 57 primary schools and 38 secondary schools, we are successfully teaching content through the language. Over the past 10 years, we have actually seen these children from the age of 3 to 12 in primary schools, and now in the first 2 years of secondary school, successfully learning content through another language. Are they learning the language? Well, of course they are! That question surprises me always. If they're understanding, and children at the end of primary in this project, most of them have 100% comprehension; they have very good reading skills, competent writing skills, and their speaking is developing, so of course they're learning the language. And when they're going into secondary school, the secondary teachers of geography and science, not the language teachers, although they're saying it as well, but the secondary teachers of geography and science are saying: These children are wonderful. We're teaching them just as we'd be teaching Spanish children, and they're having no problems understanding the content. They make lots of mistakes in the grammar, but they have no problems understanding, and they are well able to communicate their meaning in English. So we are teaching content in English, and, by the time they finish secondary school, they'll have a very high level of English as well.

A few years ago in Madrid, the children in year 6 were exposed to Trinity Level 6 Exam, the written part of which was designed especially for them. And in several schools in Madrid, at the age of 12, a number of the children were quite clearly at B1 level of the Common European Framework. They had no preparation for the test, they weren't being prepared specially to jump through any hoops. And they actually were at a B1 level in the language test. And the primary school teachers of geography and science don't find any difference at all, quite the contrary, in their ability to understand the knowledge and the application of scientific skills in the subject. So evidence from this one project, and may I point out that this is a project in state schools; it's not in private schools, it's in state schools where there very often have been and still are children from less favourable home environments: children in a number of schools whose parents are immigrants, who perhaps themselves don't speak Spanish, and parents who quite often are themselves only semi-literate. And the children are learning the content *through* the language.

Alex M: I'll explain the two sides of my job that I've been doing over the past 15 years so that you understand my experience. I'm teaching in an international school now; I'm teaching Art, with a very heavy language focus. The students are from all nationalities. And I did the same in London, at the opposite end, which was a state school, with a lot of nationalities as well. But between those two jobs, I worked in international schools as a language support teacher, where I've gone into science, geography or maths classrooms and been the extra language helper in the subject. So I've had the two angles. I'm absolutely convinced, as Teresa Gerdes was saying, that we have to change our way of teaching along those eight lines. Then, the content and the language both are equally taught. And students respond amazingly well in a short time; although with the BICS and the CALPS I expect it would be seven years before they're academically able. You can see amazing results if you get the environment right, depending on the age of the students. So I'm absolutely convinced that it works.

ART: I'm convinced. I'm very positive about this notion of content and language integrated. I'm convinced because I experienced myself this type of program in the United States. I was teaching in an immersion program, not for immigrants to learn English, but for English speakers to learn a foreign language. I was teaching seventh grade. And that worked, and it worked quite well. And then when I'm here, in my secondary school in Andalucia they have decided to go for a plurilingual approach, even though the schools are called 'bilingual', the whole program is called 'plurilingual'. We are quite happy. And I must tell you that my school has been selected - we will start next September, one group in *primero de la ESO*, the rest of

the school still keeps the current curriculum, so we have one group; the second year we'll have one in *primero* and one in *segundo*, and so on. But our school has been selected for French! And you may say: you are mad! They go for French and you are happy. Yes, I am. They were talking in the presentation right before this one about content. What happens with content? Content keeps being the same. In our system, in our program, content is taught in both languages, by the content teachers. So they are teaching about two-thirds of teaching time in Spanish, and one-third in the second language. The L2 is trained for, and the L3 is trained for, and the Spanish department is also asked to participate in the program. So in some places it's just a few teachers here and there just making an application for a program, a project, and if it is accepted, go ahead. Here it is a question of the whole school, the whole school is involved. Right now we are just training and designing the curriculum in Andalucia. But the atmosphere of the school has changed completely. French teachers are going to the *Escuela de Idiomas* to learn English, and English teachers are going to the *Escuela de Idiomas* to learn French. We are being more active organizing exchanges, bilingual pages in the school magazine...and then everything has changed, everything is moving. The principal is very convinced, that is very important. He's a social studies teacher, and he's going to teach next year *primero de la ESO*. So even though it is French, we are happy. It is not that there is no role for English teachers. We are quite a large school, so we have this experimental, if you want to call it that, program, and then we have the current curriculum. So both languages are growing.

TR: Antonio's said something there which is quite important. It's the idea of change. The idea of cultural change. I don't mean culture there in the sense of teaching about Halloween, for example. I've just come from a British Council conference in Brighton where we had people from the 70 British Council countries around the world. And we see this focus on changing language education – there's an understanding that, for young people now, education is different, education is changing. The role of English is changing. I think Antonio is absolutely right: we are looking at moving towards a plurilingual society, and I don't think it matters what language it is. I think it was Fishman in 1976 who said: Bilingual education isn't about bilingualism, it's about education. It doesn't matter which language the children are learning; the point is that they are learning through a language; they're becoming bilingual, they're becoming plurilingual. This is something that is happening globally, it's not just happening in Spain, it's not just happening in Europe. It's very exciting! We are at the beginning of what is a complete change in language education.

TG: I think also what Antonio said about his school's administration supports them. That's so important. You need to have the support of the entire school, of the school staff. They need to be aware of what you are trying to do with bilingual education. And you need to have the support of the administration to be able to do this successfully. That makes a big difference.