

CONTENT-BASED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION AND ITS BENEFITS

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Abstract. *Although a substantial amount of professional literature argues for the potential benefits of content-based instruction, limited research exists on how this type of instruction actually is appropriated, understood, and carried out in practice by foreign language teachers. This study examines the role of two sixth grade Spanish teachers' discursive practices in content-based instruction, the goals of instruction, and the students' proficiency.*

Keywords: *classroom discourse, content-based instruction, literacy, teaching language and content.*

INTRODUCTION

Although a substantial amount of professional literature argues for the potential benefits of content-based instruction, limited research exists on how this type of instruction is actually appropriated, understood, and carried out by foreign language teachers. Foreign language teachers are often grounded in language teaching methodology and knowledgeable about language and cultures. However, when faced with a foreign language course that draws on the school's academic curriculum as the vehicle of language instruction, teachers often lack the content knowledge and the pedagogical approaches to support exploring academic subject matter.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Over the past several years, foreign language educators (Crandall, 1993; Short, 1997; Snow, 1998; Stoller, 2004) have promoted the benefits of content-based instruction, stating that such instruction fosters academic growth while also developing language proficiency. According to Curtain and Pesola (1994), “. . . in content-related instruction, the foreign language teacher uses concepts

from the regular curriculum to enrich the program with academic content The curriculum content is chosen to provide a vehicle for language learning and to reinforce the academic skills needed by the students” (p. 35).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the role of the teachers’ discursive practices on content-based instruction, the goals of instruction, and the students’ linguistic development. We analyzed discourse data from two sixth grade content-based Spanish classrooms in the same school taught by two different instructors who used the same curriculum. The insights gained from this analysis shed light on how content-based instruction is realized in two classrooms and the relationship between teachers’ talk, classroom tasks, and students’ language development. To the best of our knowledge, no other empirical studies have been conducted that describe the use of a content-based instruction curriculum from a classroom discourse perspective.

This study is qualitative in nature in that it seeks to document, analyze, and interpret naturally occurring data in the content-based instruction classroom setting. For this reason, we made no attempt at manipulating variables or predicting performance. Research in the qualitative paradigm seeks to understand a phenomenon—content-based instruction—as it emerges dynamically and socially in the experiences of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). We chose a qualitative approach based on our own initial observations of these classes and the differences that we perceived in the construction of talk in these classrooms. Qualitative research allowed us to explore and analyze closely the discursive features of these classes and the effects of these different features on classroom participation and student outcomes.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the findings may not directly generalize to all teachers in content-based classrooms. However, this study provides a close analysis of how content-based instruction is carried out in one school district in particular, and sheds light on the approach of content-based instruction in general. The qualitative nature of this study precludes generalizing

to all those who participate in content-based instruction classes, although our analysis and findings might easily transfer to other settings and resonate with the reader. As is the case for all qualitative research, the findings of this study contribute to a grounded conceptual understanding of the construct of content-based instruction rather than generalize teaching practice to all content-based instruction teachers, students, and programs.

We observed eight classes prior to videotaping and noticed differences in the ways that each teacher interacted with the students during their opening conversations. Since these opening conversations reflected the interactional oral practices that we observed in both classes throughout entire lessons, they served as a proxy for the teachers' customary interactional style with their students. Conversational features include coherent topical themes for discussion, expressive reactions to interlocutor contributions, and feedback that advances the topic of conversation (for a discussion of evaluative feedback vs. nonevaluative feedback, see Cazden 2001; Mantero, 2000a, 2000b; Mehan, 1979; Wells, 1993, 1996, 1999). Interactions constructed in pragmatically appropriate ways are considered useful discursive environments for the development of interactional competence (Hall, 1995). Thus, in a classroom where the conversational topics change rapidly and where formulaic uses of the language are more prevalent, there is little opportunity for students to engage in pragmatically appropriate conversations with the instructor and with other students. Similarly, the extensive use of evaluative feedback, characteristic of initiation-response-evaluation discourse patterns, has been shown to inhibit students from further elaboration, explanation, and clarification (Donato & Brooks, 2004).

Several implications for instruction in content-based instruction programs and the professional development of teachers emerge from this research. These instructional implications involve two complementary goals: the continual development of language proficiency and student achievement in meeting academic content objectives. The following implications derive from the

research and address both these concerns.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly point out the significance of teacher talk for aspects of student learning beyond oral proficiency. Grace's discourse balanced academic content and a focus on language, including implicit error correction, provided opportunities for the coconstruction of form, and revealed conversational features of interpersonal communication. In contrast, James' discourse focused primarily on manipulative practice of language form, explicit error correction by the teacher, and nontopically related exchanges with his students. Because Grace's students performed higher in the literacy assessments, it is possible that there is a link between features of classroom discourse and student performance when writing about academic content. Thus, teachers in content-based instruction must consider how their language might influence various aspects of students' language proficiency beyond spoken interpersonal communication.

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