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Functional language and content learning: building social practices.

Summary of presentation

A) Why functional language and content learning in the subject area classroom?

The Canadian situation (compare it with the situation in Germany).

1. Like other G8 countries, Canada's birthrate is too low to maintain its workforce.
2. So the Canadian Federal Government has approved a high rate of immigration to add to its workforce.
3. As a knowledge-based economy, Canada needs a highly educated workforce. Opportunities for unskilled manual labor are declining.
4. Unfortunately, many immigrant students who speak English as a Second Language drop out of high school and fail to graduate, facing unemployment.
5. These immigrant students have been unable to succeed in their content classrooms (e.g. classrooms in science, mathematics, social studies etc.)
6. It appears that ability in English is an important factor in this failure.
7. Why not require them to stay in classes in English as a Second Language until they are able to manage the language demands of their content classrooms?
8. Jim Cummins: Conversational language proficiency can be achieved in 1-2 years in the host country. Academic language proficiency takes 5-8 years to achieve at the level of their native English-speaking peers. So staying in ESL classes is not feasible, because it would make it impossible for many of these students to graduate.
9. So can we change content classrooms so that ESL learners can learn language and content (ie subject matter) at the same time?
10. When we ask this question we should be alert to the possibility that we may be led to rethink our conceptions of education (Don't content classrooms already teach language as well as content, in some sense? Shouldn't traditional language teaching classrooms be changed?) This may be a wakeup call for innovation in education generally.
11. Let us summarise the situation so that the central issues appear clearly. We will consider three main types of classroom, ignoring all variations:
 - (A).A content class (e.g. science) for native speakers of English.
 - (B).A content class for learners of English as a second language, using a functional language learning and content learning approach.
 - (C). A language class for learners of English.
11. We will describe a case study that makes a comparison of (A) and (B) and will suggest ways in which (B) should be different from (A). In our conclusions we will briefly discuss how (B) is different from (C).

Conclusion

1) In the case study, the teacher who taught a science class with second language learners and used a functional approach to language and content learning achieved a better result than the teacher who taught a science class to native speakers. This gives hope that we can help second language learners learn language and learn subject matter effectively if we use innovative ways of teaching. It gives hope that we can help second language learners develop the science register and other academic registers and discourse skills to succeed in education. It gives hope that we can raise the level of academic achievement for second language learners and allow them to gain access to the education that they deserve. We may thus help them graduate from school and take their appropriate place in society.

2) What were the characteristics of the teacher who used a functional approach to language and content learning?

- a) She saw science language as the major medium for science learning, not as an incidental.
- b) She saw science language as a resource for making meaning in science and as a tool for scientific thinking; she saw a strong connection between language and content; she therefore expected learners to use science language and actively helped them to do so.
- c) She saw science meaning as multimodal and communicated science meanings through words, actions, diagrams, physical things and so on.
- d) She did not assume that the learners would “pick up” science language, they needed her guidance to move from everyday to technical language.
- e) She saw the magnetism unit holistically as a social practice of magnetism, with a theory of magnetism and a practice of experiments with magnetism. She did not see it as a random collection of student experiences. She ordered the experiments carefully to build understanding and reviewed them progressively. In this way, she worked to develop the social practice as a coherent and meaningful context
- f) She developed students’ understanding of this theory and practice dialectically and progressively. Moving between theory and practice, she encouraged language use so that the students’ hands-on experiences with experiments became more understandable, and their understanding of theory deepened. She helped students relate theory and practice.
- g) She developed technical terms and technical taxonomies, and related them to actual things. She developed causal explanations and related them to actual processes and happenings. She thus developed the elements of scientific knowledge structures and genres.

3) How does traditional second language teaching differ from the characteristics of the teacher who used a functional approach? Do we also need to change traditional second language education? Is it failing to address the problems of immigrant students?

Traditional language teaching:

- a) Sees language as a focus of learning rather than as a medium of learning
- b) Sees language as rules and corrects the learners errors, rather than developing language as a resource for meaning
- c) Typically works at the sentence level and below, rather than working with texts, genres, and knowledge structures.
- d) Works with language as a ‘thing by itself’ and does not see context as important, rather than working with texts in the context of meaningful social practices.

- e) Sees the second language as a way to express pre-existing ideas, rather than seeing language as a tool to new create ideas (like 'attract' and 'repel' in magnetism).
- f) emphasises the language system rather than examining how meaning can be represented across different media.

4) This research leads on to the wider question of language as a medium of learning for all students, not just second language learners. Consider, for example, the science class for native speakers. It may well be that they would also benefit from a functional approach to language and content teaching. This is an important future research question. We do not yet have evidence for it. However in my personal experience many of the teachers we worked with in the Vancouver Schools project (see Mohan, Leung & Davison 2001) stated their belief that there would be a benefit. In that project the teachers used a functional approach to language and content in many elementary school classrooms that were a mix of second language learners and native speakers. Educational policies that make greater efforts to improve language as a medium of learning for all students, not just second language learners, would begin to address the issues raised by 'mixed' classrooms. At a broader level, they might build a stronger coalition for needed changes in the educational system.