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Is Whole Language Teaching Compatible With Content-Based Instruction?

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The answer to this question is, "Yes, absolutely!" A whole language approach is appropriate for teaching second language through content-based instruction for learners of all ages and in all subject areas. However, in order to understand how whole language supports content-based instruction, it is necessary to recognize two things: (a) Whole language is not limited to the teaching of reading and writing in lower elementary school grades, and (b) whole language is an approach to teaching and learning rather than a method or a series of materials. Teachers who use a whole language approach with second language learners realize the importance of teaching language through subject area content.

Roots of Whole Language

Whole language has its roots in the 18th-century writings of Rousseau and Pestalozzi, both of whom encouraged a holistic approach to all education. They believed that learning moves "from concrete, sensory experience" and should not be "drilled through rote memorization and corporal punishment" (Miller, 1988, p. 7). Shannon (1991) points out that the current whole language movement is based on two historical traditions: student-centered education and social reconstruction. In whole language classes, teachers teach "to and from the experiences of their students" (Olsen & Mullen, 1990), and they involve students in critical assessment of their social reality (Freeman & Freeman, 1991). These goals can best be accomplished in whole language classes that offer solid subject matter teaching.

Current whole language practices in the U.S. are the result of a grassroots movement of elementary teachers who were dissatisfied with being forced to teach reading from carefully structured materials such as basal readers and writing from grammar rules and language workbooks. The research in first language reading and writing by K. Goodman (1986), Y. Goodman (1985), Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984), Smith (1971), and Graves (1983) and in second lan-

guage literacy by Edelsky (1986) and Hudelson (1984) supports an approach that uses authentic reading materials, process writing, and organization around theme cycles (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991).

However, whole language is not limited to the teaching of literacy or the use of theme cycles in the lower grades. Whole language has also been successfully implemented in upper grade content classes, including classes with second language students (Freeman & Freeman, 1989a, 1989b). Content area teachers in the 1990s realize that their students are socially, economically, and ethnically diverse and that any one set of educational programs, textbooks, and workbooks cannot meet their needs. By 1995 there will be 1.5 million second language learners in California, and the challenge is to help these students succeed academically. ESL students need more than language drills or exercises designed to develop communicative competence. They do not have years to practice English before they acquire academic knowledge. They need to be offered an education that allows them to learn English through meaningful content so they can achieve academic and social success, and that is the goal of whole language teachers for their second language students.

The Questioning Lesson Plan: Whole Language Content Planning

Content-based instruction for second language students involves students in reading and writing in all subject areas. Content area teachers using whole language often organize around themes that come out of the students' own questions. These themes engage students in meaningful activities that move from whole to part, build on students' interests and backgrounds, serve their needs, provide opportunities for social interaction, and develop their skills in oral and written language as they use their first and second languages.

Clark (1988) has pointed out that curriculum should involve students "in some of the significant issues in life." He therefore encourages teachers to design their curriculum around "questions worth arguing about" (p. 29), suggesting questions for different age groups, such as: "How am I a member of many families?" (grades K-1); "What are the patterns that make communities work?" (grades 2-3); "How do humans and culture evolve and change?" (grades 4-5); "How does one live responsibly as a member of the global village?" (grades 6-8).

Sizer (1990) draws on the same idea by suggesting that organizing around *essential questions* leads to "engaging and effective curricula." In social studies, teachers responsible for teaching U.S. History might begin with broad questions especially appropriate in our diverse society, such as "Who is American? Who should stay? Who should stay out? Whose country is it anyway?" (p. 49). Sizer suggests larger questions for long-term planning and smaller, engaging questions to fit within the broader ones. For example, an essential question in botany might be, "What is life, growth, 'natural' development, and what factors most influence healthy development?" A smaller engaging question might be, "Do stems of germinating seedlings always grow upwards and the roots downwards?" (p. 50).

In all of the above examples, the goal is to make the curriculum student centered rather than teacher centered by involving students in answering relevant, real world questions that they help to raise. Whole language teachers often organize curriculum by using questions for day-by-day lesson planning. It is important to point out that in learner-centered classes, the questions come primarily from the students; however, as a member of the learning community, the teacher can also raise questions.

A method for planning consistent with whole language and suitable for content classes is the following *questioning lesson plan.*

This lesson plan format is designed to help teachers reconceptualize a curriculum as a series of questions generated by the students and the teacher as they explore topics together. This format also encourages teachers to keep in focus the broad concepts they are studying. It asks them to consider how each lesson might connect to broader themes. It also asks them to consider specific ways they can make the input comprehensible for their second language students. Planning lessons with this format is one way teachers can put whole language theory into practice with second language students. In addition, teachers have found that the whole language checklist, drawn from whole language principles (Freeman & Freeman, 1988), is useful to help them evaluate their content lessons.

Questioning Lesson Plan

1. **What is the question worth talking about?**
   Can the topic for this lesson be formulated in a question? What is the engaging smaller question that fits into your broader question for your overall theme?
2. **How does the question fit into your overall plan?**
   What is the broad question/theme that you and your students are exploring over time? How does the smaller, engaging question support the concepts you are working on with this broad question?
3. **How will you find out what the students already know about the question?**
   What are different ways your students might show what they already know about answering the question? You might brainstorm, do an experiment, interview someone, and so forth.
4. **What strategies will you use together to explore the question?**
   What are ways the question might be answered? You and your students might read, do an experiment, brainstorm, ask an expert, work out a problem together, and so forth. Ask the students if they have ideas about how to answer the question.
5. **What materials will you use together to explore the question?**
   List the resources, including people, that students might use to answer the question. Again, ask the students if they have ideas about this.
6. **What steps will you and the students take to explore the question?**
   In order to be sure that you are keeping in mind principles about learning, consult the *whole language checklist* below.
7. **How will you observe the students' learning?**
   What are some different ways to evaluate the process of your students' learning? Be sure to consider alternatives to traditional tests including group presentations, a group-produced book or newspaper, the results of an experiment, a drawing or schemata, and so forth.
8. **What specific techniques will you use to insure that the input is comprehensible for your second language students?**
   Have you planned to use sheltering techniques including visuals, gestures, group work, and first language support?

Whole Language Checklist

- Does the lesson move from the general to the specific? Are details presented within a general conceptual framework?
- Is there an attempt to draw on student background knowledge and interests? Are students given choices?
- Is the content meaningful? Does it serve a purpose for the learners?
- Do students work together cooperatively? Do students interact with one another or do they only react to the teacher?
- Do students have an opportunity to read and write as well as speak and listen during the lesson?
- Is there support for the students' first language and culture?
- Does the teacher demonstrate a belief that students will succeed?

Conclusion

The popular view that whole language means literacy instruction for elementary students is too narrow. Whole language extends to math, science, social studies, and all the content areas and to secondary as well as elementary education. Whole language means instruction that centers on students' needs and interests. Teachers applying whole language with second language students teach language through content because they recognize the importance of their students' developing not only language but also academic competence. Whole language without content instruction is not whole language. ■

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