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How Can Content-Based Instruction Be Implemented at the High School Level?

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Researchers and language teachers have pointed out that there is a strong need for integrated language and content programs for ESL learners at the elementary and secondary level (Mohan, 1986; Cantoni-Harvey, 1987). The chief goal of such programs is to focus on academic competence in addition to language communication skills. Educators such as Gianelli (1991) who have implemented thematic units in their ESL curriculum report positive results. The question which needs to be answered is no longer whether it is effective to implement content-based instruction but how the integration of language and content can take place in school settings.

To investigate this issue, I have chosen to describe a content-based ESL program at Thomas Jefferson High School in Los Angeles, where I currently teach. The official name of the program is ESL Humanitas. The program originated at Cleveland Humanities Magnet High School a decade ago, envisioned and created by teacher Neil Anstead. In 1986, the Los Angeles Educational Partnership received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to fund mainstream English interdisciplinary programs in non magnet settings. Jefferson High School was one of the first eight sites to launch Humanitas. The project has now expanded to 29 schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and new teams of teachers are trained each year.

In 1990, the ESL section of Humanitas was established as an experimental program in four Los Angeles high schools: Jefferson, North Hollywood, Monroe, and Gardena. It was designed to utilize content for language acquisition and develop students' awareness of the interconnection in all areas of knowledge. Some of the philosophical premises of the Humanitas program are to break down artificial boundaries between disciplines and to develop written, oral, and critical thinking skills through a writing-based curriculum.

The design of the Jefferson ESL program resembles the adjunct model of content-based instruction, which is more typically found in postsecondary settings. The participating students are concurrently enrolled in coordinated classes of ESL, biology, and U.S. history. The curriculum of each semester is divided into three thematic units, and all language assignments are related to these predetermined themes. The classes are linked through a sharing of the themes, and they complement each other by mutually coordinated assignments. The content of biology and U.S. history is reinforced in the language class; thus, the students use English in the language class to read and write about the topics covered in the two content classes.

All of the ESL students in the program at Jefferson High come from Latin America and have low-intermediate to intermediate levels of English proficiency when they enter the program. They are classified as ESL 3 during the first semester and ESL 4 in the second semester. Classes meet in a four-hour block of instruction every day; there are two periods of ESL instruction, one period of biology, and one period of U.S. history.

The umbrella theme for the two-semester program is human relations. The subthemes, three for each semester, are related to each other, and are recycled throughout the school year. The subthemes are introduced in the following order:

Fall Semester

- (a) culture and human behavior
- (b) identity and self-awareness
- (c) the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism

Spring Semester

- (d) immigration and racial prejudice
- (e) individual and group power
- (f) atomic age—conflicts and resolutions

Key concepts link the subthemes and are addressed in all three classes. For example, the first unit on culture and human behavior includes the following concepts:

1. Culture is the collection of values, beliefs, customs, and language that people share in common and which can be taught to the next generation.
2. Culture is necessary for survival and the existence of human beings as human beings.
3. Human beings are the product of culture and biology.
4. Learning a language involves learning a culture; it is a process of forming one's identity. (The concept of identity introduced here becomes a natural bridge for the next unit on self-awareness and identity.)

The ESL class for the first unit on culture and human behavior covers different components of culture, introduces key vocabulary, and analyzes the process of acquiring a language and entering the cultural domain of human life as exemplified by the life of Helen Keller. In the biology class, the students study the difference between human and nonhuman behavior and focus on how human behavior is culturally determined. The U.S. history class focuses on the cultural roots (Indian and European) of Hispanic populations and sheds some light on historical causes of cultural differences between the U.S. and Latin America.

One of the major challenges of interdisciplinary instruction is integrating the content across participating classes. The students, accustomed to the traditional high school program, have to adjust to this connection between the English and content classes, which they perceive as unrelated. Theme integration is achieved through a variety of assignments, one of which involves the students' presenting a visual-oral self-awareness project in the ESL class in which they explore their Indian-Hispanic cultural roots. In another assignment, the students create a new civilization on an unknown planet with the focus on the biological adaptation of a group of humans to a new environment. In still another integrated activity, students are involved in producing a movie on the basis of the short story, "On the Sidewalk Bleeding" by Evan Hunter, which they have read and analyzed in the ESL class. This video project is the culminating activity of the unit. It follows discussions and written assignments pertaining to life choices and consequences and reflects the students' explorations of their awareness of these choices. This project exemplifies how art can be brought into the classroom to provide students with opportunities for creative self-expression; it also provides a transition to the second subtheme of identity and self-awareness.

Written assignments are another method of integrating our curriculum. The team structure of Humanitas allows all three instructors to work with the students on particular assignments from the very beginning of the program. Moreover, the students are able to work throughout the day on one topic, developing their ideas and written products as they move from one class to another.

As the ESL teacher in this program, I have observed incredible development in the Humanitas students' language skills compared to the students in the traditional ESL classes which I also teach. One of the main areas of growth is in essay organization. As a teaching strategy, I provide students with authentic models of essay writing from primary sources such as Bertrand Russell's autobiography. During the first semester, the Humanitas students are able to produce coherent multiparagraph essays which evidence higher order thinking skills while their peers in non-Humanitas classes are still working on paragraphs retelling their personal experiences. The Humanitas

students' essays, on the other hand, discuss such concepts as the loss of Indians' identity under the Spanish occupation of the Americas. The success of such conceptual writing in the content-based program supports the view that content teaching facilitates language learning and that academic progress does not need to be delayed by deferring content-area instruction until students are proficient in the second language (Curtain, 1986).

The fact that the Humanitas students are taught by a team of teachers who simultaneously discuss the same concepts and often disagree about them provides an atmosphere which stimulates intellectual curiosity. It also encourages students to take risks in defining their own point of view. Initially students are often confused when they find out that teachers do not want them to repeat their opinions but search instead for their own. Gradually they sharpen their critical judgment skills and start asking questions. Such questioning of concepts, in my experience, occurs less frequently in traditional ESL classes.

An evaluation of the general Humanitas program was recently conducted by the Center for the Study of Evaluation at UCLA (Aschbacher, 1991). The study reported a significant improvement in students' writing over the course of a year. Furthermore, the study found that: "The impact [of the program] was particularly noticeable on students' conceptual understanding, where Humanitas students made their largest gains and comparison students made virtually no improvement during the year" (p. 18).

At the end of the first year of the ESL Humanitas Program at Jefferson High, we also had a very strong impression that the Humanitas ESL students were ahead of other ESL students in English skills and cognitive abilities. The progress of our ESL students seems to be congruent with the overall progress of the mainstream Humanitas students who surpassed their peers and improved their school performance in such areas as writing skills and grades earned (Merl, 1991).¹

The current ESL Humanitas program at Jefferson High is designed as a one-year project; its expansion is presently being considered. The possible directions being discussed are post-ESL (students continuing on after they exit ESL classes) and ESL 2 (low-intermediate) entry options. Although the students who leave the current program can function very successfully in regular mainstream classes, the mainstream Humanitas program is still too challenging for them linguistically. The post-ESL section would create an opportunity for them to continue their conceptual development at an appropriate language level. Moreover, it is hoped that a three-year program commencing at the ESL 2 level would prepare these students for the academic rigors of college work.

Our year and a half experience with the Humanitas Program at Jefferson High has revealed several important issues, which can serve others as guidelines for setting up a content-based program. Since the instructional teams are creating an original curriculum, they need various kinds of support. For one, the teams need access to good photocopying facilities, since they teach primarily from teacher-produced materials adapted from a number of resources. Teachers and program coordinators also need support of a different kind—namely release time to develop these teaching materials, to attend training workshops, and to plan and coordinate field trips and cultural events. There are presently three training centers for the district-wide Humanitas Program where the instructional teams are able to receive in-service training. Additional funds are also made available for a two-week Summer Academy, which provides an invaluable opportunity for all teachers who wish to share experiences and refine their programs. Funding for many of the above support services has come from the Los Angeles Educational Partnership, the Rockefeller Foundation, and other private institutions.

Finally, our experience with content-based instruction at the secondary school level has revealed that setting up a team that can work effectively together is a key ingredient to success. It is important, in my opinion, that instructors be allowed to create their own teams voluntarily. Developing a new curriculum, adapting materials to the students' developing language levels, and meeting with team members to coordinate instruction requires a great deal of effort. Being a Humanitas ESL teacher means learning other subjects to integrate the concepts and assignments, taking risks and experimenting with new ideas, and being alert to shortcomings and ready to make changes constantly. If a team of teachers is willing to face these challenges, a content-based program can provide a long-awaited opportunity for tremendous growth both for students and their teachers. ■

Footnotes

1. I am currently attempting to capture this growth empirically in a study which compares the ESL Humanitas and non-Humanitas groups. To this end, I have collected data from the ESL 2 and ESL 4 final exams (mandatory district tests), the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, and the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills and will be analyzing them shortly in my master's thesis.

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