

FORUM

STUDY EXAMINES ROLE OF ACADEMIC LANGUAGE IN SOCIAL STUDIES CONTENT-ESL CLASSES

Deborah J. Short

Headline Article - Forum v17 n3 Spring 1994

This article is based on Integrating language and culture in middle school American history classes, which reports the findings from a study conducted by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.

The participation of linguistically and culturally diverse students in U.S. schools increased dramatically during the last decade. Tucker (1990) projects that, by the year 2000, the majority of the school-aged population in 50 or more major U.S. cities will be from language minority backgrounds. To succeed academically, these students-English language learners (ELLs)- must master both academic content and the English language.

The content-ESL program model offers a promising alternative designed to minimize the time gap between when ELL students master English and when they begin receiving content area instruction. A key feature of the model is a strong emphasis on active student communication on content topics. Successful techniques include increased use of visuals, demonstrations, and graphic organizers; the development of thinking and study skills; and the use of pre-reading and pre-writing activities (see, among others, Crandall, 1993; Short, 1991). By providing opportunities to use language in meaningful contexts, teachers can facilitate their students' transition into mainstream courses.

Academic Language

A prerequisite to developing integrated language and content lessons is an understanding of the academic language competencies needed to function successfully in the content classroom. In "Integrating Language and Culture in the Social Studies," a study begun in 1991 by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, academic language was defined broadly to include: (1) semantic and syntactic features such as vocabulary items, sentence structure, transition markers, and cohesive ties; and (2) language functions and tasks that are part of the social studies classroom routine, such as defining terms, explaining historical significance, reading expository text, and preparing research reports. The study identified key social studies terms and tasks that need to be mastered by students as part of an American history course:

- Instructional tools. Students need to use tools that correspond closely to social studies, such as globes and maps. These tools generate language that varies from key vocabulary words such as "north" and "south" to general classroom instructions such as "look at the bottom of page 25."
- Concrete vocabulary, such as names of famous people and events (e.g., Paul Revere, Stamp Act), can be taught directly using visual aids, demonstrations, and physical movement.
- Conceptual vocabulary is more abstract and thus more difficult for students to comprehend. Some concepts are more context-specific (e.g., democracy, patriotism), while others can be more general and not limited to the social studies context (e.g., taxation). Mastery of both types of conceptual vocabulary is critical to understanding history. Teachers of ELLs should take care to instruct students in the meanings and uses of conceptual words by drawing connections to current events or students' personal

experiences.

- Language functions. Some language functions occur regularly in both student and teacher discourse; others are in the domain of the teacher. For example, both teachers and students define terms and sequence events, but rephrasing student responses, conducting information reviews, or giving directions are generally limited to the teacher's domain. Teachers should provide students opportunities to practice using their functional language.

Researchers' examination of textbooks used in middle school American history courses also revealed common text structures. Most texts, for example, either follow a chronological order or use a cause and effect framework. Analyses of these texts, along with lesson presentations and assignments, showed that certain linguistic signals cue students to time references, cause and effect, and comparison and contrast. These include verb tenses and conditions, expressions of time, rhetorical markers (e.g., temporal phrases, conjunctions), and causative words (e.g., as a result, so). Classroom observations showed that students who were taught to recognize these cues improved their reading and writing skills.

Developing an Instructional Model

Working closely with middle school teachers, researchers applied their findings to develop an instructional unit, *Protest and the American Revolution*. The unit was designed to be culturally inclusive with activities that build on students' backgrounds and reflect the popular diversity of the late 1700s.

Individual lessons focus on events and issues leading to the American Revolution, types and symbols of protest, and the roles played by various ethnic, racial, and gender groups during the 1760s and 1770s. Students in the pilot class responded well to the unit's theme, many relating it to their own heritage and experiences. Because the theme is topical, it also allows teachers to draw connections with current events.

Teacher Strategies

Teachers who participated in the study modified their lessons to incorporate the study's findings. When necessary, for example, they provided explicit vocabulary instructions or modeled activities to the whole class before breaking into small groups. They supplemented textbooks to help students view history from the perspectives of people living at the time. They used pre-reading and pre-writing strategies to build ELLs' schema prior to completing an assignment. They encouraged students to conduct independent research, but provided support or helped students solicit assistance from each other. Researchers found that these accommodations aided students in grasping and applying the academic language of social studies in building their knowledge of American history.

Conclusion

The integration of language, content, and culture into the social studies curriculum is a promising instructional approach that addresses the needs of an increasingly diverse, multicultural society. Lessons such as *Protest and the American Revolution* offer students a perspective on content that relates to and values their knowledge of their own cultures and histories.

Furthermore, lessons that provide valuable opportunities for hands-on interaction with historical concepts and events, and promote discussion, reading comprehension, and writing processes- opportunities that are often lacking in middle school social studies curricula-can engage ELL students and motivate them to master not only the content matter, but also the English language.

Finally, project observations and analyses revealed that the academic language used in social studies is commensurate with much of the academic language in other humanities courses and is similar to the non-technical language used in math and science classes. Because the language skills required for social studies mirror those needed in other academic content areas, integrated language and social studies classes can provide ELLs with critical opportunities to build and master academic language and tasks that can transfer to and help them succeed in mainstream classes.

References Crandall, J. A. (1993). Content-centered learning in the United States. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 13, 111-126.

Short, D. (1991). *How to integrate language and content instruction: A training manual* (2nd ed). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Tucker, G. R. (1990). Cognitive and social correlates of additive bilinguality. In J. E. Alatis (Ed.), *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.