

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION GRANT (DDG)

Effective Grammar Instruction for Adults

PROJECT TITLE

The Integration of Language and Content:
Form-Focussed Instruction in a Content-based Language Program

INVESTIGATOR

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DETAILED PROPOSAL

Statement of research issue and relationship to TIRF's current research priority:

The proposed research investigates effective grammar instruction for adults studying in content-based language programs designed to prepare them for employment in specific workplace sectors. This study is concerned with three aspects of FFI instruction in content-based programs. Firstly, as programs are designed to achieve gains in language proficiency, it is essential to establish the effectiveness of FFI for this purpose. The first question is then: What effect does FFI have on language learning in content-based language classrooms? A unique aspect of these programs is their dual concern with both language and content and the concern that attention to form will have a negative impact on the learning of content. The second research question investigates this concern: What effect does FFI have on content learning in content-based language classrooms? The root of this concern arises from anecdotal reports by teachers who describe how any attention to form within these specific contexts tends to shift learner attention away from the content and disrupts their content learning. The third research question investigates this assertion: What effect does FFI have on learner attention to language and content?

Theoretical background:

Bernard Mohan in 1985 lamented the separation of language and content as inadequate for the needs of learners around the world who receive education and training in a second language. Premised on an understanding of language as “a system that relates what is being talked about (content) and the means used to talk about it (expression)” (Mohan, 1985:1), Mohan called for instruction that combined language and content and proposed a knowledge framework to achieve this. Mohan's seminal work provided a foundation for the construct of content-based language instruction that is supported by

research from various disciplines and areas of research, including cognitive psychology, learner interest research, and research in second language acquisition processes.

Research in cognitive psychology views language learning as the development of a complex cognitive skill and has explored the link between depth of processing and memory. Anderson and Reder (1979) describe how input that is semantically rich, termed 'elaborated', encourages greater depth of processing and facilitates recall of learning. Text is elaborated by content. The richer the content, the more elaborated and connected the input becomes. Content in language learning provides rich semantic input and in this way helps learners recall language learning more easily. This research has provided the basis for the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), which complements content instruction with instruction in learning strategies (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Research exploring the link between learner interest and learning suggests that interesting content engages learners and in this way encourages the development of an associative network and deeper cognitive processing (Tobias, 1994). Other research has suggested that interesting subject-matter knowledge facilitates recall (Alexander et al, 1993).

The research of Jim Cummins also provides support for the relationship between language and content learning. Drawing on research investigating the academic achievement and language proficiency of bilingual and multilingual children, Cummins (2000) distinguishes between proficiency in interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive/academic language proficiency. Proficiency in academic language is a longer developmental process and can be enhanced by a linguistic environment enriched with content. Content-based language instruction also draws support from theoretical claims that meaningful input provided via content and meaning-based instruction is not only essential but sufficient for language acquisition (Krashen, 1991). Other researchers in second language acquisition have explored the relationship between form and meaning and have suggested that they are highly co-dependent, that the meaning of content cannot be processed without attention to the form of the language and that learners pay attention to language form when it is most essential to the communication of meaning (Lightbown & Spada, 1994).

Content-based instruction is differentiated from other language teaching and learning approaches in every aspect of practice, including syllabus design, lesson planning, assessment, classroom strategies, teacher preparation and learner enrolment (Eskey, 1997). Content-based programs share a preoccupation with content that influences development and classroom practice. They can, however, be implemented and delivered in a variety of models (see Snow & Brinton, 1997 for overview) and fundamentally differ in the degree to which they emphasize content or language. Rather than constituting distinct categories, the various models can be seen as placed along a continuum. At one end of the continuum, there are models that emphasize content outcomes over language outcomes. At the other end, the emphasis may be strongly on language development over content learning. In addition, the focus on language and content within a particular model may shift depending on the learners and the teacher. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) model employed in the European Union is an example of this shift. The balance between content and language focus shifts at different points in the program (see Marsh, 2002).

The development of form-focussed instruction as a theoretical construct is rooted in fundamental shifts in how language learning and teaching have been viewed by researchers and practitioners. For several decades, language teaching had been dominated by theory and practice that assigned a central role to linguistic structure and a learner's knowledge about language. This was evident in audiolingual and grammar translation approaches. In the 1970s attention shifted away from the notion of language knowledge to that of language use. One of the most influential developments was the notion of communicative competence coined by Hymes (1971) to account for a social dimension to a theory of language learning. Hymes' theory did not reject the importance of grammatical competence but described it as one of several facets of competence essential for communication. Around the same time, Halliday (1973) emphasized the importance of semantics and viewed language as a sharing of meaning negotiated between individuals. These views provided a theoretical basis to the development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as an approach to L2 instruction that included attention to meaning and form. CLT was further developed by other primarily British applied linguists including Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Littlewood (1981) and Widdowson (1978).

At the same time that CLT was developing in the UK, theoretical claims made about the role of input in second language acquisition laid the foundation for the development of a strong version of communicative language teaching. Krashen (1981) posited that comprehensible input was the essential and sufficient ingredient for language acquisition and that instruction of linguistic form was ineffective. This perspective was widely influential and lent support to the development of content-based language programs that viewed language learning as incidental. French immersion programs were considered as an excellent example of this theory in action. Ironically, research conducted in French immersion programs cast doubt on this exclusive focus on meaning. Researchers found that students in these programs were not developing the linguistic accuracy in production expected after years of meaningful exposure to the language (Harley and Swain, 1984). These findings prompted a call for a greater focus on language form within meaning-based instruction.

In response, researchers explored the role of interaction and output in helping learners become aware of form while engaged in meaningful communication. Swain (1985) suggested that by interacting with others, learners might notice a gap between what they want to say and what they are able to say. In addition, when learners produce output during interaction, they have the opportunity to hypothesize and experiment with language. Similarly, Long (1991) argued that a breakdown in meaning during interaction could lead to a focus on form as learners negotiate meaning, which in turn makes input more comprehensible. This shift from meaning to form was described by Long as *focus on form* and was defined as an attempt to "overtly draw students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning" (Long, 1991 p 47). He contrasted this with *focus on forms*, intended to describe more traditional approaches in which teaching was organized around linguistic forms (e.g. grammar translation). While the terms have endured, Long's definitions have been modified to include options in which a focus on form is planned as well as incidental (Doughty and Williams, 1998). Other researchers have used the term form-focussed instruction (Spada, 1997, Ellis 2001) to capture a broader scope of the construct. Ellis

(2001) applies this term most broadly by including attempts to draw attention to form within any teaching approach, including more traditional programs organized around linguistic units. Spada (1997) situates FFI clearly within meaning-based instruction and provides a definition appropriate to content-based instruction.

Current research in FFI has explored the efficacy of instructional options (see Williams, 2005 and Spada, 1997 for an overview). The various options reflect proactive and reactive approaches to FFI. Following a proactive approach, the teacher attempts to pre-select the language forms for attention based on the expectation that the form is problematic for the learner and essential for communication. This may include planning tasks to exploit the target form, designing activities to 'practice' the forms, and presenting the target form with metalinguistic explanations. A reactive approach does not assume a focus on any one form from the onset. It involves primarily the provision of feedback in response to learner error. Feedback may include highly implicit responses in which the instructor recasts the error or may be more explicit and include metalinguistic explanation (Lyster & Ranta, 1997).

Generally, research has shown positive benefits for FFI in both language programs and content-based instruction (Lyster, 2007; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada, 1997). Despite these findings, a number of issues remain outstanding. Studies have highlighted that the effectiveness of FFI can be influenced by differences in settings, learners and program goals. Much of the research has been situated in second and foreign language programs focussed exclusively on language development rather than content-based programs concerned with both language and content. Research in content-based language programs has drawn heavily from either immersion models in child education or academic subject matter study for adults (see Lyster, 2007 for overview). These conditions make it difficult to generalize findings across a spectrum of instruction. Furthermore, despite the extensive body of research supporting FFI as a means of integrating language and content, classroom observation has revealed that a focus on form has not been widely adopted in content-based language programs (Musumeci, 1996; Pica, 2002). A review of content-based texts revealed that attention to grammar varied widely and generally did not address the links between language form and content in depth (Masters, 2000). While it is not entirely clear why this is the case, the nature of content-based programs may have an influence on both learner and teacher attitudes towards FFI. It has been suggested that when language and content are presented together, learners will generally pay attention to content over form (Eskey, 1997), particularly for learners at lower levels of proficiency (VanPatten, 1990). In addition, the nature of content-based programs may lead learners to focus on content and to be less aware of language form (Ellis, 2001, Leowen, 2004). Although described as language programs, content learning is a key goal of many content-based programs that aspire to the *Two for One* approach described by Lightbown and Spada (2006) and instructor concerns with regard to the effect that attention to language may have on learning outcomes are valid. Despite this, there has been little research exploring learner attention in adult content-based language instruction and the effect of FFI on the learning of content in programs with adult learners.

Research methodology : Participants

The proposed research will be carried out in a content-based program designed to teach adult immigrants to Canada the English language skills and content knowledge necessary for successful employment in the field of Early Childhood Education. The 200 hour program is offered by the continuing education department of a school board and funded by a ministry of the Government of Ontario. The program offers classes to adult learners in evening, day and weekend schedules. The course is taught by an instructor who is a qualified ESL instructor and a practitioner in Early Childhood Education. She brings expertise in both language and content instruction. The learners are assessed on entry and exit from the program for both language and content learning outcomes.

The participants will be approximately 40 adult women ranging in age from 25 to 55 years of age and from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The majority of the learners have some college or university education and are previously educated in fields related to ECE. Their time in Canada ranges from a few months to several years with the majority between three and five years. The level of English proficiency is intermediate, identified as levels 4 & 5 on the Canadian Language Benchmarks scale which ranges from 1 to 12¹ (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2000).

The setting for the proposed research provides positive research conditions for a quasi-experimental study in that a number of variables that traditionally have confounded classroom research are mitigated by the structure of the program. In this program, two groups of learners are enrolled in the same program with the same syllabus. The syllabus addresses the same content and language learning outcomes. The classes meet for approximately the same number of hours per week so neither group of learners experiences a more intensive learning experience than the other. In addition, both groups are taught by the same instructor and observation in this program has confirmed that instruction varies slightly or not at all from group to group with respect to attention paid to language and content.

Instructional treatment:

The instructional treatment seeks to contrast FFI with meaning-focussed instruction (MFI). In this study, the FFI treatment will include a range of options, both proactive and reactive. The instructor will provide implicit and explicit corrective feedback, metalinguistic explanations and planned tasks designed to incorporate the use of specific language forms. MFI will include implicit corrective feedback and planned tasks. Therefore while there is some FFI in the MFI treatment, it is highly implicit and for the purposes of the learners, this treatment constitutes meaning focussed, content-focussed instruction. In addition, recasts are considered to be the most implicit form of error correction provided by instructors and are noticed least by the learners (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Furthermore, the exclusion of feedback and task planning would threaten the ecological validity of the study situated in a program in which both these instructional practices are considered basic tenets of good pedagogy.

The instructional treatment will take place over a 15 week period for both groups of learners. One group will receive FFI treatment while the other will receive MFI

^{1 1} The Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) is a descriptive scale of communicative proficiency in English as a Second Language expressed as 12 benchmarks or reference points. Development and implementation of the CLB is funded by the Government of Canada and managed by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks.

throughout the period. The course goals, including language competencies and content will not differ. The difference will lie in how language is addressed in instruction. In the FFI group, the instructor will draw attention to form when two specific linguistic forms intersect with the content. In this group, all other linguistic forms will be subjected only to MFI. In the MFI group, all linguistic forms will be treated with MFI only. The two grammatical structures to be addressed with FFI in this study are the first conditional and past tenses.

Data collective and analysis:

Quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered to respond to the research questions. Learners will be tested with a competency-based language proficiency test to establish a baseline of proficiency for the groups. Linguistic and content learning will be tested using a grammaticality judgment test (GJT), an oral task-based language measure, and a written content test that employs items of different formats, including multiple choice and short answer questions. The qualitative data will be collected using a questionnaire and interviews may be conducted with selected learners to follow-up if the questionnaire data warrants it. The quantitative tools will be used in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test assessments. The pre-tests will be delivered within a week of beginning the treatment period, the post-tests will be carried out within a week of ending the treatment and the delayed post-tests will be conducted eight to ten weeks after the end of the treatment period. The instructor will be asked to provide meaning-focussed instruction only in the period between the post-test and delayed post-tests. In data analysis, group comparisons between the FFI and MFI groups will be carried out using a repeated measures ANOVA to compare differences within and between groups over time.

Statement of likely implications for theory, policy and practice:

The results of the proposed research may have an impact on theory, policy and practice in language teaching. In the research community, the proposed study aims to shed light on the relationship between content and language learning by exploring the effect that attention to language form may have on the learning of content and language. The findings of the proposed research may have implications for policy by guiding the expenditure of public funds for content-based programs for adult immigrants. Extensive funding for the development and delivery of language programs designed to link second language acquisition and occupation specific content is provided by federal and provincial levels of government in Canada. The program in which the study is situated is a pilot project funded by the Government of Ontario. A better understanding of effective pedagogy for these programs may help direct funds more effectively toward instructional design and teacher training. The school board involved in this research, as a provider of such programs, is interested in the results of the research in order to better advise future funding initiatives. The potential for impact on practice is strong. The questions that are raised by the proposed research study are rooted in the classroom and in the personal experience of the investigator as an instructor in content-based language programs. They are shared by other instructors and program developers in the field. The results will be disseminated at a grass-roots level to both instructors and program developers and others engaged in teacher training and support.