Dissertation Title:
The integration of language and content: Form-focused instruction in a content-based language program

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Summary:

Effective grammar instruction for adult language learners has long been a concern for research and practice in the field of second language acquisition. In more recent years, traditional notions of the place of grammar instruction have been challenged by contexts of communicatively oriented language teaching such as content-based language teaching. In the present study, effective grammar instruction is investigated in a content-based language classroom and framed as the relationship between content/meaning and language/form.

Content-based language teaching has gained widespread acceptance as an effective approach in a range of educational settings for adults and children. Yet, instruction varies widely with regard to how this integration is achieved and more specifically how to achieve a balance between attention to content and attention to language. One approach to this question draws from research in form-focused instruction (FFI), which describes various instructional options that draw learners' attention to form in primarily meaning and content-based classrooms. Research investigating the effectiveness of FFI has generally shown that a focus on form and meaning is more effective than a focus on meaning alone. While widely accepted that FFI has a positive impact on language learning outcomes in a variety of contexts, FFI research in content-based language programs for adults has been limited. Research in adult CBLT programs has revealed that a focus on language form has not been widely adopted (Musumeci, 1996; Pica, 2002) and there is concern that explicit attention to language will detract from attention to content in such programs (Klee & Tednick, 1997; Toth, 2004; Zyzik & Polio, 2008). Questions remain as to the effect of FFI on attention to content in content-based language programs for adults.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects that introducing FFI into a content-based language program would have on language and content learning as well as the effect on learner awareness of content and language in their instruction. The study was carried out in a program designed to prepare adult newcomers to Canada for employment as Early Childhood Educators. Two groups of adult learners at an intermediate level of English language proficiency participated in the study, 16 in one group and 20 in the other. Both groups attended class five hours per week, either once a week on Saturday or twice a week in the evening. The same teacher taught both classes. The courses included the same content but the teacher differentiated how language was addressed: in one group, here known as the form-focused (FF) group, she

included strategies and material that drew the learners' attention to language form while in the other group, the meaning-focused (MF) group, she focused exclusively on the content with no attention to language form. The instruction lasted for 10 weeks. During three weeks of that time, the FF group received content-based instruction that included grammar explanations, corrective feedback, and tasks that focused on the specific grammar forms. During the same period, the MF group received content instruction with no focus on form.

A quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test design was adopted to determine the effect of the instruction. Learners in both groups were tested on their knowledge and ability to use the forms on written and oral pre-tests before the experimental instruction began. This was repeated 10 weeks later after FFI was delivered three times, as post-tests, and 12 weeks later after a period in which both groups were taught content only. Content knowledge was also tested in a pre-test and then again after each of the lessons that included a focus on form. In addition, during the same lesson in which learners received FFI, learners in both groups were asked to report what they believed to be the focus of the experimental instruction – a focus on language form or a focus on content.

The results of the language and content measures were analysed using ANOVA, or ANCOVA where pre-test differences existed. The findings showed no advantages on the language tests for the participants who had received the form-focused instruction. However, analysis of the content tests showed that the FF group, the one that had received the focus on form, outperformed the MF group that had received instruction only on the content. With regard to the reports completed by the learners, the results indicated that the participants were able to identify the focus of the instruction they received, whether the focus of the instruction was content or language. However, no correlation between awareness of language and language development was found.

What are the implications of these findings for teachers making decisions about the place of grammar instruction in content-based classrooms? At first blush, the findings do not lend support to claims that introducing a focus on form will improve grammatical accuracy more than maintaining an exclusive focus on content/meaning so the question remains as to the value of grammatical instruction in this kind of classroom. However, an examination of audio recordings of the experimental instruction shows that the FFI actually delivered had not included extensive corrective feedback as had been planned. This raises questions about the role of corrective feedback in helping learners make connections between form and meaning, particularly when it is provided along with other strategies designed to focus learners' attention to form such as grammatical explanations and form - focused tasks. There is evidence to suggest that corrective feedback can enhance the effectiveness of other FFI strategies such as those used in this study (see Lyster, 2004). This raises the possibility that if the FFI had been fully exploited, the results of the language measures might have shown an advantage for the group that received a focus on form.

On the question of whether a focus on form has a negative effect on attention to content, the findings showed that not only was content-learning not negatively affected, a rationale cited by content-based teachers as a reason not to focus on form, the results suggest that content learning was enhanced by a focus on form. The provision of FFI may have contributed to the learners' language proficiency in terms of receptive development which may have helped learners understand the language used in the content but could not be captured adequately by the production based language measures used in this study.   This study suggests that teachers who are considering introducing a focus on grammatical form in content-based classrooms

should consider the effect of various strategies such as corrective feedback when making pedagogical decisions. Teachers who have been convinced of the negative effect of a focus on form on content learning might consider these findings an invitation to reconsider their position about the role of grammar instruction in content-based language classes.

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