



Methods for Promoting the Acquisition of Content and Language¹

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The beauty of immersion and other content-based programs is that our students have the potential to master both language and content through a “reciprocal process” (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Thus, while students master language, they are able to learn more content. And as students learn more content, they are able to improve their language skills. Finding the proper balance between the promotion of content learning and language mastery represents one of the challenges that we all face.

When we make a commitment to promoting the acquisition of content, we can facilitate the process by meeting three conditions:

- First, we need to make sure that our learners consider **input from a variety of sources representing diverse perspectives** on related subject matter.
- The second condition is that we need to guide our students in **revisiting input for different purposes**.
- And finally, we want to make sure that our students have many opportunities to **synthesize knowledge that originates from multiple sources**.

These conditions have been referred to elsewhere as “details of implementation” (Stoller, 2002a); they are pertinent in planning and implementing different forms of content-based instruction, including immersion. These details are important enough to discuss each one in turn.

Exposure to Input from Various Content Sources, Representing Diverse Perspectives

Experience has taught us that we need to strive to bring interesting and relevant content into our classes. And if the content, possibly mandated by our school curricula, is not particularly interesting to our students, it is our job to figure out how to make it interesting. One of the most effective ways to build student interest, enhance motivation, and promote the learning of subject matter is to expose students to extended input that stems from *a variety of sources*, representing a range of perspectives and genres. A single source of content (whether it be a reading, or a video, or a guest speaker) simply does not create the conditions that are needed to guide students toward learning content and, at the same time, improving their language skills.

It is useful to think of content in the broadest way possible. Imagine that we are exploring a unit on the civil rights movement in the United States. One of the best ways to build the instructional unit

would be to bring in primary and secondary readings, videos, teacher-generated lectures, and perhaps interviews conducted by students with guest speakers. The content base of our unit could also be enhanced with visuals, in the form of maps, charts, graphs, and bulletin board displays. Field trips and the use of other community resources could add to our content resources as well. The World Wide Web represents another excellent source of content. Web sources are particularly helpful for immersion and other foreign language contexts because foreign language sources appropriate to the cognitive level and proficiency level of learners can be difficult to come by.

When selecting content, we might want to think about content as sources of positive tension. What we mean by positive tension is the tension that comes from different perspectives on the same theme (not the “negative” tension that creates fear, apprehension, or anxiety among our students). Positive tension results from the thoughtful consideration of (a) multiple perspectives, (b) different but complementary views, and (c) opposing viewpoints.

To illustrate the value of positive tension, consider an instructional unit on the Hopi Indians of northern Arizona. In such a unit, students can be exposed purposefully and systematically to a range of perspectives originating from multiple sources. Positive tension emerges when students consider views such as these: traditional versus nontraditional Hopi views; the perspectives of young versus elderly Hopi; U.S. government versus tribal government viewpoints; mainstream culture versus tribal perspectives; scholarly perspectives with facts and statistics versus personal interpretations from Hopi guest speakers; historical versus contemporary viewpoints; and written, oral, and pictorial depictions of Hopi life. When a range of perspectives, like these, is integrated into classroom instruction, interesting class discussions, critical thinking, debates, and careful reading, to name just a few engaging activities, come alive, leading to extended language use and the solidification of content learning.

Sadly, few published materials contain the range of perspectives and variety of content resources needed to create positive tension. Consequently, it becomes our responsibility to supplement the materials that we are using; such efforts are best coordinated with colleagues so that a team of teachers works toward broadening the scope of the input that is brought into class. Such collaborative efforts make it possible to craft tasks—involving the use of varied content resources with the potential for building positive tension—that require students to compare and contrast, evaluate, take a stand, make judgments, discover biases, and identify contradictions. Activities such as these are motivating, they involve a lot of meaningful language exposure and use, they help to consolidate content learning, and they encourage elaboration. The end result, without much manipulation on our parts, is the natural recycling of language and content and lots of learning.

At this point, we might ask ourselves how much content is enough to create an instructional unit that leads to meaningful and sustained language use and content learning. There is no single response to this question because teaching contexts are so different from one another. Thus, it might be more profitable to pose a different question: “What would an instructional unit look like that has enough content to promote both content learning and language learning?” Imagine a middle school unit on meteorology, focusing on weather patterns and among other topics, the relationships among evaporation, condensation, and precipitation. A meteorology unit with sufficient content—for meaningful content and language learning to take place—would have the following characteristics:

- First, we would have enough time for the introduction of multiple (and varied) sources of new information.

- Second, we would have enough time to bring in tasks that guide students in considering newly learned information in relationship to already introduced perspectives on the same theme.
- Third, we would incorporate tasks into our instruction that guide students in making explicit comparisons across different concepts, facts, and perspectives, from within one content resource, and across numerous content resources. Such activities require students to look back at texts that they have already considered. These tasks may inspire students to look forward, as well.

One of the benefits of striving to devise instructional units with these three characteristics is that the content resources and tasks will provide students with multiple encounters with pertinent vocabulary and related concepts. In a unit on meteorology, for example, the terms *evaporation*, *condensation*, and *precipitation* would most likely surface time and time again, in meaningful contexts. This natural recycling is important because being knowledgeable and conversant about a content area means being familiar with key terms and the concepts associated with them. It is also important because when the concepts related to content are held constant, opportunities arise for students to direct their cognitive energy toward improving their *language* use in relationship to that content.

We have to be cautious, however, that we do not inadvertently go to extremes and bring too much content into our classrooms. Sometimes teachers become so excited about a video that they have seen or about a reading or a chart or a graph that they have discovered that they cannot resist the urge to integrate it into their classroom instruction. Although students need to be exposed to plentiful content, we must not overload them. Thus, the goal is to reach the proper balance, one indicator being *time*. That is, we know that we have brought in *too much* content (a) when we do not have time to satisfy the requirements associated with the three characteristics just specified (see above) or (b) when we do not have enough time to guide our students in revisiting content (and language) for different purposes, an important condition for promoting content and language learning.

Revisiting Input for Different Purposes

The learning of content, just like the learning of vocabulary, requires multiple exposures. We can encourage students to revisit content and recycle language in many ways. Five commonly used pedagogical practices, listed in Figure 1, can be used as techniques for encouraging students to revisit content for different purposes, thereby consolidating content and language learning. Each time the purpose of the task changes, so too does the language needed to complete the task. Thus, as students are revisiting the content, they are also practicing different language functions and structures.

Figure 1. Techniques for Revisiting Content for Different Purposes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report (e.g., in a jigsaw activity, in a written report) • Re-examine (e.g., by re-reading with a different goal in mind) • Repeat (e.g., in a dictation, dicto-comp, role play) • Reformat (e.g., in a graphic organizer) • Review (e.g., for a quiz, an oral presentation, an interview)

The activities suggested in Figure 1 are commonplace, yet they take on great importance when we consider how they contribute to students' growing expertise in a content area and their improving language abilities. When we ask students to *report* what they have learned (from, for example, a reading, a video, a graph, a survey of classmates, a guest speaker, or a combination of information sources), they often go back to the original sources, or their notes, to review and consolidate information. They then report what they have learned, recycling content and language in the process and solidifying their understanding of the material. The report might be in the form of a written summary, a poster display, or a verbal interaction with a classmate, possibly part of a jigsaw reading activity. Reporting activities might last just a few minutes, when students turn to a classmate sitting nearby to report the main ideas of a reading, or they may require more classroom time. Luckily, reporting activities come in many shapes and forms, giving us many options, but the result is always positive: consolidated content and language learning.

We often ask students to *re-examine* content by re-reading passages, or viewing a video a second time. But that is not enough; we need to ask them to re-read or re-view with a different purpose in mind. Let us give you an example. Imagine an instructional unit on energy in which students watch a video for the first time to simply generate a list of the energy types that are introduced in the video. At the end of the task, students have a list in hand, stating something like the following: nuclear, fossil fuel, wind, thermal. The second time around, students could be asked to watch the video to identify the pros and cons of each energy type, or they could be asked to watch the video a second time to confirm understanding, to look for biases, to find strengths in the argument, to find contradictions, to personalize content, or maybe to connect with previously introduced content information. Revisiting input for different purposes is especially important in the immersion context because resources that are written at the appropriate cognitive and language level of learners can be difficult to locate. Therefore, finding ways to revisit sources of input in the same unit, or perhaps in other units and grade levels, can help to maximize the use of available sources.

We can also ask students to *repeat* content, moving from a written text, for example, to a role-play (for more contextualized speaking practice), or to a dictation or dicto-comp activity (for listening and writing practice). One important outcome of such activities is that they provide a purposeful opportunity for students to revisit input, once again consolidating the learning of content and language.

Another common practice among teachers in immersion and other content-based settings is the use of graphic organizers (e.g., semantic maps, Venn diagrams, timelines, grids) to promote the learning of subject matter. When using graphic organizers, students *reformat* information by either filling in graphic organizers provided by the teacher or creating graphic organizers of their own. Graphic organizers are versatile teaching and learning tools; they can assist learners in processing, comprehending, synthesizing, and displaying intricate ideas in ways that, in many instances, put more emphasis on grasp of concepts than mastery of language. Grasp of concepts is, of course, key in immersion, as in other content-based programs, but additional tasks can be added to graphic-organizer activities to encourage language practice that is related to the content displayed in the graphic organizer. In the CoBaLTT (Content-Based Language Teaching through Technology) program at the University of Minnesota, a set of templates for combining both content learning and language practice through the use of graphic organizers has been created.² As an example, let's return for a moment to the unit on Hopi Indians. Imagine that students have been exposed to various sources showing mainstream culture vs. tribal perspectives. Students might be asked to synthesize information from these various content sources in a graphic organizer that lends itself to comparison

**Figure 2:
Comparison & Contrast Chart with Added Language Task**

Purpose: To compare/contrast Hopi Tribal and Mainstream Culture Perspectives

	Hopi Tribal Perspectives	Mainstream Culture Perspectives
Land Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Live in harmony with nature · Respect nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Control nature · Master nature
World View	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Emphasis on group cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Emphasis on competition between individuals
Family Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Extended family · Respect for age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Nuclear family · Emphasis on youth

Additional Language Task: Write 2 sentences using telling verbs in the past tense to identify contrasting perspectives. Each sentence should have two clauses, each stating a different perspective. To signal contrast, use “whereas” in one sentence and “but” in the other.

Possible Student Response: Whereas the mainstream culture emphasizes competition between individuals, Hopi tribal culture emphasizes group cooperation.

and contrast (see Figure 2 for a comparison & contrast chart). Such an activity, in and of itself, is an excellent way for students to pull together content from various sources and see how the two perspectives differ and how they are similar. Yet, the major emphasis is on content learning because often the only language that students need to use for the activity is vocabulary and perhaps some short phrases in the present or past tenses. To encourage more extended language use, an expanded task might require students to write summary sentences using words and structures that signal comparison/contrast (e.g., however, although, whereas, both, also; see Figure 2). The CoBaLTT graphic organizer templates mentioned earlier assist teachers in planning this additional language task. The templates are ideal for the immersion context because all fields on the template are customizable; thus, the templates allow teachers to incorporate information on the graphic organizer in the immersion language. When using these customized graphic organizers in class, students *reformat* content and, at the same time, practice specific language structures, thereby combining content mastery and language use.

Finally, of course, we all ask our students to *review* content, for quizzes, for oral presentations, for classroom discussions and debates, to name just a few activities that require students to review content for different purposes. These activities, and the others mentioned here, contribute to the learning of content and the mastering of language. The key is to find the proper balance between plentiful (and varied) content with the potential for building positive tension and opportunities for the purposeful revisiting of content.

Synthesizing Information that Originates from Different Sources

One additional condition can help students acquire course subject matter and, at the same time, improve their language abilities. To satisfy this condition, we need to design extended tasks that require students to synthesize information from different sources. As part of synthesis activities, students find that they have to do the following:

- ask critical questions
- find recurring patterns
- look for relationships within one text and across multiple texts
- make important connections
- draw conclusions

These synthesis tasks require students to be actively engaged; the tasks, when carefully orchestrated, guide students in consolidating content learning and using and recycling language in meaningful ways. At the end of the extended synthesis task, students pull everything together in a brand new “entity” that they can call their own. The task might result in a written report, an oral presentation, a theatrical or video production, a poster session, or a website (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Possible Culminating Synthesis Tasks		
Debates	Written reports	Oral presentations
Graphic organizers	Theatrical productions	Video productions
Poster presentations	Projects	Web-page sites

For example, Melissa Melnick, a high school teacher in the Minneapolis Public Schools, designed the following culminating synthesis task for a literature/language arts unit in a Spanish dual immersion program.³ In the unit, titled “Social Drama,” students explore a variety of key social issues. They view and read multiple examples of good and poor dialogues, discussing their distinctive features. They learn how dialogue works in a play by reading a portion of a play, by Lidia Falcón, about a woman who is physically assaulted by her husband and goes to report the incident to an unsympathetic police officer. Students explore the different perspectives of the characters—the woman, her husband, and the police officer—and examine how dialogue can reflect characters’ personalities. Then students practice writing dialogue and drama by taking narratives and turning them into scripts. They practice acting out the scripts in front of the class and examine what works and what needs improving. The final culminating synthesis activity (unit assessment) is a group project. Groups of 4-6 students are asked to write and act out a play for children in a Spanish immersion school or bilingual program. First, they are instructed to contact teachers and identify age-appropriate social issues around which to construct their scripts (e.g., bullying, making friends, divorce). Each group then identifies a setting, time period, and characters for their scripts; they have to create a script that incorporates a problem/conflict, a climax, and resolution. The groups are to generate a complete script in writing and act out the play to the group of learners (using costumes, props, etc.). They have time to submit drafts of the written portion of the project and receive

feedback from peers and the teacher; they are also given the opportunity to practice the play in front of their classmates for feedback before the actual presentation in front of the children. Both content knowledge (features of a play, characteristics of good characters and dialogue, etc.) and language use (both oral and written) are assessed with a rubric that allows for the assessment of content, organization, language use, and overall presentation.

Culminating synthesis activities, like the one described above, require that students apply their knowledge by creating an original product. The result is a series of authentic tasks that are meaningful and purposeful (Tedick, 2003). These tasks are especially powerful when created for a real audience, not just reserved for the teacher or classmates.

Conclusion

In this *Bridge* feature, we have attempted to describe three conditions that should exist in our classrooms to promote the acquisition of content and the mastery of language. When designing instructional units, selecting appropriate materials, and planning daily lessons, we should keep the following in mind: Students will benefit from being asked to consider input from a variety of content sources that (a) represent diverse perspectives on related subject matter and (b) have the potential for building positive tension. Students will also benefit from being asked, on a regular basis, to revisit input for different (and meaningful) purposes. And, finally, students should be given the opportunity to synthesize knowledge that originates from multiple sources and tasks. A commitment to this three-way orientation makes it fairly straightforward to find the balance that allows us to meet our students' content- and language-learning needs.

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Notes

¹Much of this *Bridge* insert has been adapted (and expanded) from a portion of a plenary address given by Fredricka L. Stoller at the TESOL convention in Salt Lake City, Utah, in April 2002. The entire text of her talk can be found at: carla.acad.umn.edu/cobaltd/modules/strategies/stoller.html.

²The graphic organizer templates can be found at: carla.acad.umn.edu/cobaltd/go/INDEX.HTM. At this site, teachers will find 20 customizable graphic organizers, along with an overview that itemizes the thinking skills and possible language structures that specific graphic organizers target. A rationale for using graphic organizers in the classroom and a series of illustrated steps for using the templates are provided as well.

³Melissa Melnick's unit will soon be available in its entirety at the CoBaLTT Web Resource Center at: carla.acad.umn.edu/cobaltd/.