



How Are Content-Based Instructional Practices Reflected in Sheltered English?

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Every teacher has experienced both the thrill and satisfaction of finding exactly the right vehicle for conveying a difficult concept. When students are not able to grasp an idea through a conventional lecture, the teacher who is learner-centered seeks an alternative method to turn on the light of understanding. Whether with an illustrative example, an anecdotal digression, a graph, or chart, the teacher works to modify the delivery of the material to turn the concept into comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). This act of modification is what *sheltering content material is all about*. In sheltered English, the teacher seeks to match the appropriate activity to both the language and cognitive level of the student. The thrill for the teacher occurs when the flicker of understanding lights the student's face.

"I felt like an astronaut in a rocket looking at the constellations."

"... I learned a whole lot about outer space. Mr. Dorff was amazing. It was a very exciting experience."

So say the students of a fourth grade sheltered science class at Edison Elementary School in Glendale, California. They had just spent an entire day and evening at school with Tom Dorff, a local astronomer, who had spent time sharing slides, telling stories, and giving students and their parents an opportunity to view the night sky through telescopes. The reactions of these students is what can be heard from the majority of second language learners in sheltered situations.

What did these students understand? They brought to this experience their schemata, a basic background knowledge of sky and stars, to grasp conceptually the thrust of Dorff's lecture. Through visual aids, he expanded their schema; they focused on the slides and viewed the visual images as they listened in the dark to an explanation of the constellations. Being in the dark and having their attention focused on the content rather than on language or themselves allowed

them to relax and so lower their affective filters (Krashen, 1982). In this relaxed, but charged atmosphere, students were able to learn without worrying about the language barrier. They were excited and involved in the activities. Second language acquisition was taking place.

Prior to Tom Dorff's visit, teachers had prepared their ESL students with a variety of hands-on science activities: They made star charts and models, used flashlights to demonstrate a variety of astral phenomena, and measured and drew the sun and planets to scale on the playground. A star scavenger hunt was held, in which the students located and shared information through the use of reference materials. With colored paper, paints, and chalk the students also made artistic stellar representations. This lesson is but one example of sheltering content in a science class. Tom Dorff not only used outstanding visual techniques, he also created a context in which what was stated verbally reinforced content that had been previously taught. In creating both a relaxed atmosphere and a content-enriched context, the visiting astronomer provided the supportive learning environment which enables the ESL learner to be academically successful (Sasser & Winningham, 1991).

Glendale Unified School District has designed a program to meet the needs of limited English proficient (LEP) students in social studies and science. The Title VII Academic Excellence Program, now in its second year, provides support to students through a combination of materials and instructional strategies. There is an emphasis on the use of visuals and hands-on activities. Such strategies as cooperative learning and student pairing are built into the integrated curriculum. The program publishes the *SEA* (Sheltered English Approach) *News*, in which teachers are invited to share specific activities they have successfully implemented.

Other programs throughout California are adopting similar methods for helping LEP students study the content areas. Denise Evans, who works in the Emergency Immigrant Education Assistance Program (a federally funded program within the Los Angeles Unified School District), teaches her LEP students history and science with popcorn. Speaking slowly and articulately, she explains that the idea of popping corn was discovered by Native Americans; she has students duplicate this ancient procedure. After the students have completed the process and are contentedly eating popcorn, Evans draws them into a discussion of how the fusion of heat and moisture forces the popcorn to pop. Understanding has been enhanced by both demonstration and firsthand experience, two sheltered English strategies (Richard-Amato & Snow, 1992).

In the Los Angeles Unified School District, Sue Friedman, a teacher at Polytechnic High School, teaches aerobics in her health class. Even beginning ESL students are able to follow the teacher as she leads them through a variety of physical exercises. As they work out, they

listen to American music and are thus provided with the language of our current pop heroes. They learn, through graphing, the importance of increasing heart rate. They are able to check their pulses and compare, on a visual chart, the increased efficiency of the heart muscle. They are also better able to comprehend how increased breathing speed positively affects the pulmonary system. In sweat pants, head bands, and aerobic shoes, students experience a sense of membership in the adoptive culture, a secondary benefit of the sheltered health lesson. After participating in the aerobics class, one student remarked, "Now I know why all those people at the park are running. Before, I thought they were going somewhere!"

These students have been served by sheltered instructional techniques used in content-based instruction. In looking at K-12 students being served today, we see an exploding population arriving in the United States—all needing to learn English, academic skills, and the adoptive culture. Although every teacher is not an ESL teacher, language minority students sitting in content classrooms force the realization that a certain degree of understanding of the second language acquisition process is critical to all teachers—language and content alike. The content teacher can use sheltered English techniques to successfully bridge the gap between ESL methodologies and content-based instruction. Borrowing from strategies once used exclusively in language classrooms, content teachers modify their modes of instruction to better serve the LEP student. The teacher maintains the level of content previously taught but modifies the language structures so that the language is not an obstruction to the student learning about a given topic. For each concept, the teacher searches for the best method of conveying the concept. Consider what the teachers described above did to teach content to students with limited English proficiency:

- (a) created a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere;
- (b) provided hands-on experiences with content material;
- (c) used visual materials rather than printed text when possible;
- (d) used charts and graphs;
- (e) demonstrated procedures using realia (real objects and materials);
- (f) set up group discussions for students to interact;
- (g) spoke more slowly;
- (h) taught the same concept in a variety of modes;
- (i) prepared students by expanding background knowledge; and
- (j) contextualized concepts.

These classroom modifications immediately serve the language minority student but are merely a beginning list. There are an infinite number of techniques for making content comprehensible. (See Richard-Amato and Snow, 1992).

In addition, content lessons that include sheltered English techniques—visuals, realia, and interactive strategies—teach a host of cultural concepts that rarely surface in the traditional textbook-reading scenario. And going beyond routine classroom procedures to reach out to language minority students sends a message to these students that they count as learners. Often, students respond with greater motivation.

Making content and language more accessible to language minority students requires a stimulating cognitive and affective environment. Sheltering content lessons is not an easier way of teaching; it demands creative thinking and careful planning. But the results are gratifying. One of the benefits sheltered English has brought about is a lively dialogue among teachers seeking to share approaches that have worked. LEP students benefit from what these teachers share as they continue to develop a store of sheltered content lessons to meet the needs of their particular learning group. In California, teachers are busy creating a wide array of inventive activities that allow students to comprehend high-level content in a rich learning environment. ■

References

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