

# Balancing Content & Language in the English Language Development Classroom

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As an instructor of courses in a university English as a Second Language (ESL) endorsement program (an 18-credit hour program that “adds” an endorsement to an initial teaching license, grades K-12), I find that ESL teacher candidates often ask how to develop curricula for an English Language Development (ELD) class. Questions arise as we critique former and current practices that lean toward teaching English grammar out of context (Ciechanowski, 2013; Mize & Dantas-Whitney, 2007). I design the ESL endorsement program courses so they are aligned with the *NCATE/TESOL ESL K-12 Teacher Education Program Standards* (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2010). The authors of the standards endorse, with the support of numerous leaders in the ESL field, an ESL curriculum that is designed to teach language within the context of academic content (2010). Although course assignments require ESL teacher candidates to design activities, performance assessments, and lessons that balance the teaching of the English language and academic content, the ESL teacher candidates remain perplexed as to how to teach without a prescribed curriculum.

The answer is challenging, given the flux that the field is experiencing nationwide, a lack of consensus among theorists and researchers regarding effective ELD instruction, the variety of ELD program models that operate in our schools, and a scarcity of resources (or lack of funding for them) that provide structure and continuity over the course of an academic year (Goldberg, 2008). The

Oregon Department of Education (ODOE) recently adopted new English language proficiency (ELP) standards that address the teaching of language forms and functions with connections to academic content (ODOE, 2013). This is a starting point for developing curriculum and instruction that teaches language in context. But, how do we move from a curriculum focused on grammar forms to one that is balanced with content?

For the past five years, I have collaborated in a variety of ways with a group of teachers in the Canby School District who work in a dual language immersion (DLI) program (Spanish-English; 80:20 model). The teachers at Trost Elementary School have a 45 minute ELD class period in which English learners (ELs) are grouped by their Spanish language proficiency skills as measured by the *Evaluación del Desarrollo de la Lectura 2* (EDL; 2007), as recommended by Escamilla (2010). While the ELs receive assistance with English language acquisition, the native English speakers receive supplemental instruction in English Language Arts, thus the ELs do not miss any content classes, because every student in the school is receiving instruction in English at the same time. I have observed several of these teachers on numerous occasions and noticed that they teach English forms and functions through thematic units that are abundant with academic content concepts. Last year, Danielle (the first author), who is a teacher at the school, and I decided to document the planning of a thematic unit that she teaches to ELs during ELD time, and how it is imple-

mented from beginning to end.

The purpose of our project was to document how an ELD teacher plans and implements content-based instruction (CBI). The question driving our project was: How does an ELD teacher balance the teaching of language and content during ELD? Our research began with an interview focused on details of Danielle's curriculum planning and was followed by eight classroom observations that I videotaped. Our data also included students' writing samples that they completed throughout the unit. Students' parents signed permission slips for them to participate in this study and the study was approved through the University of Portland's Human Subjects Review Process. The second grade ELD class included 15 ELs (Latinos) designated at the "early intermediate" level of English language proficiency. The thematic unit, "Animal Classification," focused on adaptation and classification using comparison functions and subject-verb coordination forms.

### **Balancing Language & Content**

Researchers and theorists have long supported content-based ESL instruction (Curtain & Pesola, 1994; Genesee, 1994; Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Met, 1991). Historically, CBI has its roots in Canada's language immersion programs that flourished in the 1960s (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012), was recognized in the U.S. in the 1980s (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2010), and has gained popularity in the U.S. over the past few years (Duenas, 2003). Leaders in the ESL field have written variations of the definition of CBI, but the following one sums it up well:

Content-based language instruction is an integrated approach to language instruction drawing topics, texts, and tasks from content or subject matter classes, but focusing on the cognitive, academic language skills

required to participate effectively in content instruction (Crandall & Tucker, 1990, p. 83).

The benefits of learning a language through academic topics are numerous. Research in second language acquisition has shown that CBI: integrates cognitive, social, language, and academic development (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013); prepares ELs for the academic content taught in mainstream courses (Brown, 2004); makes language learning more concrete rather than abstract when the focus is on language (Genesee, 1994); broadens and deepens language proficiency (Crandall & Tucker, 1990); and promotes critical thinking skills (Met, 1991). Students learning in a second language not only have to learn language through the curriculum, but also must learn the content of the curriculum. The academic demands of each subject matter increase and concepts become more abstract and cognitively demanding each year for students. The more students have an opportunity to build knowledge through thematic learning experiences, the more students will be able to build their content knowledge as well as their language abilities. In order for this to happen, careful planning must occur so that intentional and meaningful language instruction happens in the content-based classroom (Bigelow, Ranney, & Dalhman, 2006).

Lyster (2007) offers a "counter-balanced approach" to teaching language and content and explains that counterbalanced instruction has a goal of "integrating both form-focused instruction and content-based instruction in conjunction with language across the curriculum and other pivotal literacy-based approaches at the heart of school-based learning" (p 126). In this approach, Lyster provides instructional strategies that help teachers plan for systematic language instruction that draw students' attention to

language within the context of the content instruction through “noticing,” “awareness” and practice activities. For example:

Learners engage primarily in receptive processing during noticing activities, which serve to move the learner towards more target-like representations of the second language. Learners engage either receptively or productively, or both in awareness activities, which serve to consolidate the cognitive restructuring or rule-based declarative representations. (p. 66).

Noticing activities require the teacher to enhance input of a selected form, either by increasing its use, changing voice tone, or color-coding words so the form is more obvious. The awareness phase asks students to not only observe the form, but also explain patterns they are observing. One way this might happen is through generating a “rule” to understand the form. Both of these strategies draw students’ attention to a specific form and do so in the context of the content. As much as ELs need specific vocabulary instruction and targeted language instruction, they also need more scaffolding and support in order to access the academic written and spoken language used in schools.

## **Background**

Danielle has been teaching in the DLI program at the elementary school for eight years. She has taught second, fourth, and sixth grades and worked as the Title IA Reading Specialist. We began working together while she was completing her student teaching practicum in a DLI classroom; since then, we have collaborated on a variety of projects. Danielle recently completed a Dual Language and Immersion Education Certificate through the University of Minne-

sota. It was through these classes that Danielle became familiar with Lyster’s (2007) counterbalanced approach to teaching language and content and began to implement the framework in her classroom.

Lyster’s hypothesis claims that if teachers implement certain instructional interventions that emphasize a flexible and balanced integration between form and content, the learner will be more prepared to produce accurate language. Lyster’s framework highlights three content-based instructional activities that are counterbalanced with three form-focused instructional activities. First, the teacher provides comprehensible input through exposure to a content theme. The content instruction is counterbalanced by “enhanced” input through “noticing and awareness tasks” that draw the learner’s attention to a specific language form present in the content. Next, the teacher facilitates content-based tasks that promote language production and counterbalances these tasks with practice activities. In a practice activity, the task must elicit and require the correct language form from the student. Finally, the teacher provides feedback about the specific form focused on during the instructional interventions that Lyster (2007) calls “negotiation as feedback.” This means the teacher uses specific corrective feedback techniques that draw the learner’s attention to the language form studied in the unit. In this particular unit, the lessons focus on the first two components of counterbalanced instruction.

In March 2013, the two of us sat down and discussed her ELD curriculum planning using a set of questions (Appendix A) I created to use as a guide for our conversation. The following narrative is based on Danielle’s responses to my questions. The ELD teachers at this school create “partner units” that correspond to the mainstream

class topics. They use the “backwards design model” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to design their curriculum maps and have “big ideas” and thematic units for each grade level (such as “Community” and “Weather”) that are based on Oregon content standards (such as science and social studies) at each grade level. The ELD teachers use these maps to see how the English language proficiency (ELP) standards align with the content focus of the grade level. The principal has leveraged funding to support the topics they choose, purchasing materials and resources that highlight the forms and functions they want to teach for each topic. Teachers then create Guided Language Acquisition Design (Project G.L.A.D., 2009) units that follow a structured progression of strategies that build vocabulary from recognition to production through a variety of visuals that represent content concepts, and presentations that provide comprehensible input. Grammar is taught within the context of the content concepts through modeling and self-discovery during which students are guided to notice patterns and rules. Although this process is challenging for both students and teachers alike, students

acquire language forms while developing the ability to use complex academic vocabulary.

### What Does Counter-Balanced Instruction Look Like?

Danielle began the Animal Adaptation and Classification unit by determining students’ background knowledge and vocabulary about the animal groups (for example, reptiles, fish, amphibians, mammals, insects, and birds) and what compare and contrast language (for example, like, but, whereas, and, too) they knew. In order to pre-assess the students, she created a graphic organizer (Figure 1) that asked a question about the diet, habitat, physical description, adaptations, and birth of one animal. After each student wrote about one animal, they shared the information with their partner one topic at a time. Danielle prompted them to compare their animals orally and tried to lead them through the task while listening for comparison language. For example, they would take turns reading about the habitat and then she would ask them to compare what was the same and what was different. While Danielle heard students use examples

of compare and contrast works such as *too*, *same*, and *different*, the majority of the language reflected simple sentences and non-specific nouns or explanation of the actual comparison. The example in Appendix B shows some of the vocabulary one student used in this pre-assessment.

After the pre-assessment, Danielle introduced content-specific vocabulary (words such as scales, moist, hatch, exoskeleton, fur, camouflage,

Name: <u>Josiah</u>		
Animal Classification: <u>Bunnys</u>		
Diet: What do <u>Bunny</u> eat?	Habitat: Where do <u>Bunnys</u> live?	
The Bunnys eats Kirets, in they liket so much bok, alot. Brrr Brrr alot. The Kirets.	Bunnys live unbit in a tree & in a house letal.	
Birth: Where do <u>Bunnys</u> come from?	Physical Description: What do <u>Bunny</u> look like?	Adaptations: How do <u>Bunnys</u> survive?
Bunnys come from moms.	look like The Bunnys look like soft.	Rum Fast like cars.

Figure 1

antenna, lungs, gills, vertebrate, backbone, cold-blooded, feathers, and wings), along with the content, while integrating Lyster's (2007) noticing and awareness activities to draw student's attention to compare and contrast language. She modified a GLAD chant (Project G.L.A.D., 2009) called "Classification Yes Ma'am" to introduce the physical description and birth of fish, bird, mammals, and reptiles. She also created a GLAD pictorial input chart (2009) that included color-coded information about the habitat, physical description, diet, adaptations and birth of each animal group. Danielle printed pictures of the animals named in the chant and created actions and movements to go with words while students were singing the chant. With the pictorial input chart, she included pictures of content-specific vocabulary and they used iPods to Google image other content related vocabulary. Students drew pictures in journals of two new vocabulary words per animal group.

Danielle introduced two animal groups at a time in order to begin different noticing and awareness activities that would draw students' attention to language used to compare and contrast. For example, she compared the habitat of fish and birds and asked students to listen for the words she used to compare them. Danielle and her students came up with the list: *too, but, and, different from, similar to, like, unlike, both, whereas, compared to, and also*. During this process, students would write a comparison sentence in their journals to practice using the different comparison words they were noticing.

For the second two groups, amphibians and reptiles, Danielle tried an awareness activity to make students aware of what words she used to compare characteristics that were the same, and what words she used to compare characteristics that were different. Students listened to her comparisons

(noticing activity) and then worked with a partner to create a T-chart for words used to compare similarities and words used to compare differences. Danielle and her students analyzed the two lists that the students made and agreed that *but, different from, and unlike* are used to describe differences and *both, and, also, like, and similar to* are used to describe similarities. Danielle introduced the last two animal groups, mammals and insects, and this time asked the students to notice where in the sentence she used each comparison word. After students listened to her comparisons, they worked with their partner to sort the words into the three groups: beginning, middle and end of sentence. They then created a class chart to use as a rule for when to use comparison words in a sentence.

At this point, Danielle wanted students to be able to create their own comparisons and be able to practice writing using academic language. In order to prepare students to write their own comparison paragraph, she used Gibbons' (2006) Teaching and Learning Cycle. She found a text from the San Diego Zoo website that compared and contrasted amphibians and reptiles. She modified the text to add more comparison words and simplified the language so it was at an appropriate reading level for the students. Students worked in pairs to read the paragraph and highlighted words used to compare and contrast the amphibians and reptiles.

After analyzing the paragraph together, the students chose their two favorite animal groups so they could write their own comparison paragraph. Danielle led students through a "joint construction activity," (Gibbons, 2006) during which she and the students worked together to write a comparison paragraph before students wrote independently. As she wrote, she guided students through questions, thinking aloud, and explanations (2006). Over the course of four to

five days, every student had written his or her own paragraph (please note that only 13 out of 15 students were present for the entire instructional sequence). Danielle held a writing conference with each student and focused on giving feedback related to comparison language and the content-specific vocabulary. When students were finished, they practiced reading their paragraphs and recorded themselves on iPads.

### What Did Students Learn?

As Danielle taught the unit, we videotaped the lessons and analyzed the students' work as documentation. In the beginning of the unit, students were confused by what Danielle meant by comparison language and characteristics that were similar and different. By the time she moved to the awareness activities and the rule generation with students, it was surprising to see how engaged the students were. They were excited to create rules and find patterns with language and they felt successful when they saw a pattern. In watching the videos and analyzing students' work, it was apparent that they made growth in their written and oral language production. Additionally, they were able to identify and use comparative language to write about similarities and differences between two animal groups.

Same	different
similar to too like also both	unlike both different from both

Figure 2

When Danielle began the noticing and awareness activities, students struggled to understand what she was asking of them. While the students had lots of practice developing language, using sentence frames, and receiving feedback, it was clear that Lyster's form-focused instructional practices pushed students to analyze and think about language in an unfamiliar way. After sharing three or four comparison statements with students and over-emphasizing comparison words, students realized what she was asking them to do. The students became very involved and treated the activity like it was a game. It took an intentional shift during the lesson in order for students to focus on language instead of the content.

During one of the awareness activities, students easily made a T-chart classifying which comparison words were used for similarities and which words were used for differences (Figure 2). Students were able to make this chart, but in a different activity they struggled to identify which sentences in a text expressed a similarity and which sentences expressed a difference. Similarly, students also struggled to listen to a sentence read aloud by a classmate and then decide if the statement expressed a similarity or difference between two animal groups. For example:

**Teacher:** Let's listen to this sentence and see if we can tell if María is sharing something that is similar or different.

**María:** Amphibians have body parts that help them camouflage and reptiles do too.

**Teacher:** Did you hear what comparison word María used?

**Almost everyone:** TOO!

**Teacher:** OK, now can you tell me if María was telling us something that was the same or different about reptiles and amphibians?

**Silence**

**Teacher:** Let's listen one more time.

**María:** Amphibians have body parts that help them camouflage and reptiles do too.

**Student 1:** The same

**Student 2:** No, different

**Students 3:** I think it is the same.

**Teacher:** Why do think it is the same?

In the example, students were unsure of themselves even though they easily identified in the T-chart that *too* was the comparison word used to talk about similarities. This process reinforced the importance of modeling and analyzing written texts with students. After going through the noticing and awareness activities, students still needed more experience with comparison language to understand its purpose. They were able to identify the comparison language, but not yet able to explain it.

When Danielle and I analyzed the reptile and amphibian text from the San

Mammals and REPTILES

Same	Different
REPTILES eat plants and mammals eat plants	Mammals They live and all over the world and
Mammals have lungs and legs and REPTILES have lungs	REPTILES They live mostly in the desert
REPTILES eat plants and insects and mammals eat plants and insects	REPTILES have scales Mammals have hair

Figure 3

Mammals and birds do have lots of differences and some similarities. We can tell them apart by their skin. Mammals live all over the world and birds do too. Both Mammals and birds can swim. Mammals and birds

Figure 4

Diego Zoo, Danielle observed that the students identified comparison words they had previously studied, and some students even found some of the new comparison language examples. Danielle reported that the highlighting activity was effective because it gave a purpose for reading and deconstructing the text multiple times. The students were excited to interpret the text and began to understand why it was written the way it was. It was during this process that students began to explain the use of comparison language and understand whether the text was expressing a similarity or a difference.

During the writing process, Danielle was able to see if students could use the information on the pictorial input chart and independently separate what was the same and different about their two favorite animal groups. While other language challenges are evident in students' writing, as a class, students had no trouble identifying what was the same and different about their animal groups (figure 3). The students had to mention both animal groups, but only explain one characteristic (e.g., like amphibians, reptiles are cold-blooded). In analyzing the 13 comparison paragraphs (figure 4), sixty percent of the students used at least five comparison words correctly in their paragraphs, including the

more complex words, such as *unlike* (seven students), *whereas* (seven students), *as compared to* (four students), and *different from* (four students). None of the students made mistakes related to which comparison words were used to compare similarities and which words were used to compare differences. All of the students placed the comparison words in the right place in the sentences. The most common comparison words that the students used were *but*, *and*, and *also*. Out of the 13 paragraphs, we counted five mistakes using the comparison words. The most common mistake (three students) entailed either forgetting to write *and* when using *too*, or forgetting to write *too* when using *and* (for example, *Mammals are born live fish are born live too*). Students that did struggle with the structure of a sentence were able to self-correct when the error was pointed out to them during writing conferences. The consistent focus on the use of comparison language and the step-by-step writing process led to excellent writing samples from this second-grade group of ELs at an early-intermediate language proficiency stage.

## Discussion

The instructional strategies used in this study improved students' ability to understand and use academic language confidently and naturally. Using a systematic approach that involved noticing and awareness activities was more meaningful for students rather than providing a sentence frame and having students fill in the blanks. Danielle reported that in previous instruction, she would implement practice activities right after introducing the academic vocabulary, asking students to produce language using sentence frames. Using the sentence frames, the students were successful with the language, but once this scaffold was removed, they were unable to use the correct language

forms, because they were too focused on content, and not enough on form. However, with the use of Lyster's framework, students became more metalinguistic, that is they both noticed and became aware of the forms, and thus were able to use them without sentence frames during the practice activities. This process made Danielle realize that she often "pushes" students to produce language before they have had enough modeling and enough experience with a specific content and genre. Building background, noticing language, and creating awareness about how language works took more time than she had planned. However, it was such a valuable process that she would not have changed the way she instructed the unit. It did make her think that as a school, they need a more clear focus around what academic genres and what language functions are the most important to teach at each grade or language level.

While Danielle covered less content in this unit, her students have a deeper understanding of the content than they would have, had she not tried the counterbalanced approach. Implementing instructional strategies from the counterbalanced approach made focusing on form and teaching language more exciting. Danielle knew exactly what she wanted her students to notice and be able to produce. The students also showed high levels of engagement during the form-focused activities. It also helped that the content was highly motivating, as this led to increased engagement in the text analysis and other language-focused tasks.

After this unit, Danielle and I are curious to see how well students would be able to identify comparison language in a different content area or in their native language. Going through these specific instructional strategies made Danielle wish she was also teaching the Spanish portion of the day for these same students. She believes that the students



would benefit from a parallel activity in Spanish that would allow them to make cross-language connections between English and Spanish.

## Recommendations

In returning to our research question, that is, how a teacher balances the teaching of language with the teaching of content, we conclude with some recommendations. We cannot overemphasize that effective instruction requires dedicated time to planning. Teachers might adopt a unit theme by asking questions developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), such as “What is worthy of understanding?” Teachers would then consult their state content standards to locate corresponding knowledge and skills deemed critical as each grade level. On the flip side, teachers might peruse the content standards and ask what is worthy of understanding. From there, it is useful for teachers to think through the language demands of the content standard. For example, what key vocabulary would be necessary for students to know and be able to use? What types of grammar structures will be needed (such as tense)? What language functions will be required? At that point, teachers would consult the state ELP standards to locate those forms and functions that match the English language proficiency levels of their students. Before developing the lesson sequence, teachers create an end-of-the-unit assessment in which students would demonstrate the knowledge and skills they developed throughout the unit along with a scoring rubric that aligns with the standards.

In order for content and language to intersect and work together to provide meaningful and in-depth learning of concepts, teachers’ lessons need to draw attention to grammar structures within enriching content topics. This is accomplished intentionally

and with perseverance. In this unit, as students learned about the habitats of reptiles and amphibians, for example, Danielle embedded activities that required students to notice and become aware of comparison words, *before* they were asked to use them in speaking and writing activities. Because these words were first a part of students’ receptive vocabulary, they were able to use them productively later in the unit. In addition to the use of comparison words, it is impressive to see students’ use of academic vocabulary such as, gills, camouflage, cold-blooded, and scales, in their writing samples.

It is highly recommend that ESL teachers collaborate with mainstream classroom teachers in an ELD pull-out model. When content is the driving force for choosing language features and vocabulary, the content needs to be strategically selected or “shared” between the ELD teacher and classroom teacher. In this way, teachers provide ELs access to the core curriculum through extra support using scaffolded instruction and extensive practice with academic vocabulary. It is important for us to mention that pull-out ELD models may not be the best instructional programs for ELs, because among other reasons, ELs may miss content instruction (Crawford, 2004). However, because the pull-out model is prevalent in Oregon schools (Mize & Dantas-Whitney, 2007), a content-based approach that includes collaboration between the ELD teacher and mainstream teacher would ensure that ELs would be learning the same content as their peers in mainstream classes. With the wealth of content knowledge now demanded by the Common Core State Standards across the U.S., it seems prudent to engage ELs with as much content as possible throughout the school day.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

What are the steps you use when planning for a thematic unit? What do you do first, second, third, etc.?

When you do begin planning for your thematic unit? How do you fit that into your teaching schedule?

What theories/research serve as a base for your thematic unit curriculum planning?

Which is a more of a priority, building language proficiency or academic content knowledge? Why?

What resources do you consult during your planning?

What best practices do you integrate into your instruction when teaching the thematic unit?

What resources do you use while implementing your thematic unit?

How do you monitor your instruction while implementing the thematic unit?

How do you know when you have achieved your goals/objectives for the thematic unit?