



Integrating Skills and Strategies in a Content-based Course

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As the new resource teacher for our institution's American culture and communication course, my task sounded simple: put a language focus back into a content course that had become an eclectic collection of new student orientation materials, tips for living in the U.S., and information about local and American culture. Teachers had become confused by the seemingly random and hopelessly disorganized materials available for use in the course, and students often commented that they could not see the purpose of the class and did not feel that it was helping them learn English. The process that we followed to re-establish a clearer link between content and language in this course may be of use to others engaged in curriculum development or revision.

Identifying the Problems

First, we decided that we needed to examine more than just the collection of materials that we had been using. We began with our setting. Our school is a small, two-year college in Hawaii whose primary goal is preparing Japanese students for successful transfer to an American, Japanese, or other four-year university program. Students are typically recent high school graduates with minimal English proficiency. TOEFL scores range from 380 to 450. They live with host families for at least their first year in the college. In two years, average students are able to complete an ESL program and an associate of arts degree while preparing for the rigor of third-year university study elsewhere. The American culture and communication course that is the subject of this article is one the first classes that new students take, along with two hours a day of listening/speaking and four hours of reading/writing. Among the problems with the course that we found were uninteresting materials and activities, disjointed lessons, and a heavy emphasis on reading in an already reading-heavy program.

Revising Goals and Objectives.

The ESL program coordinator and I worked together to established some new goals and objectives for the course. The overall purpose of the course would be for new students to experience particular aspects of American culture while they adapted

to life in the United States and improved their communication skills. We decided that the language component of the course should enable students to learn important daily and academic vocabulary and idioms while also using English to develop better oral fluency. The revamped course needed to fit better into our program's curriculum, which starts with extensive oral and written fluency work and is followed by a transition to a more intensive academic focus including essay writing and lecture note taking. We decided to take a more task-based approach to language practice that would encourage students to communicate not only in the classroom, but also with their host families and in the community. The overall outcome that we hoped to achieve was increased student success in the ESL and associate in arts degree programs. We also hoped that students would adjust better to host family life, feel more at ease in Hawaii, grow in their understanding of American culture, and become active participants in the life of our college.

Integrating Content and Language

From a seemingly endless number of possibilities, we chose six broad thematic areas for the content of our course: getting to know your host family, getting to know the college, personal safety and healthy dating, exploring American and Hawaiian culture, and preparing for our academic future. Each area has been developed in one or more units of instruction following the same general sequence of activities. (1) A preparation activity personalizes the topic and activates background knowledge. (2) Input, preferably a video or dialogue, serves as the primary medium for content transmission and as model for a later production task (3) Practice and awareness-raising exercises focus on the skills and strategies that will be needed to communicate in the task. (4) The production task gives students a chance to explore the content while making use of the skills and strategies modeled by the input. (5) Finally, time for feedback and reflection gives students the opportunity to think about and share what they have learned about both content and language use.

Below is a sketch of one of our units called “Getting Involved with Campus Activities” from the thematic area “Getting to Know the College.” Students who successfully complete this unit learn about the extracurricular activities offered by the college and have the language and social skills to find out more about a club or sport.

Preparation

Students discuss clubs and activities they participated in during high school and what interests they have now that they are in a new school and country. Afterwards, they read a short section from the Student Handbook about clubs and activities offered at the college.

Input

The class watches a short video of a student talking with a club officer about her club. During the interview, the student gets information such as where and when the club meets and why someone might consider joining this club. The student on the tape models good communication strategies including asking the club member if it is a good time to talk and verifying that he understood the information correctly. As they watch, the students fill-in a gapped script that draws their attention to the target strategies. Students answer questions to check for comprehension of the dialogue. Then, they discuss the strategies that the student used for communication.

Practice

Students practice having a similar dialogue with a partner, attempting to use the target strategies. Afterwards, they brainstorm questions they would like to ask a club officer using the questions from the dialogue as models.

Production

As a homework assignment, the students must approach a club officer, ask if it is a good time to talk, and find out answers to their questions about club membership. To avoid communication breakdown, they are reminded to make use of the strategies practiced in class.

Feedback and reflection

In the next class, students share the content of their interviews, putting the information together in a binder for future reference. They finish by discussing how the interviews went and whether they were able to use the target expressions to sustain the conversation.

Since we finished designing and implementing our new curriculum, course evaluations and feedback from teachers have revealed several improvements. Teachers find the language goals give clearer focus to the course and provide them with better guidance as to how to teach the required content. Students are more likely to say that they are learning English and improving their language skills. Finally, both teachers and students appear to be enjoying the course more. When we realize that it is not necessary to choose between language and content, everybody wins.

About the Author

Kevin Ballou is a resource teacher in the ESL program at TransPacific Hawaii College, a 2-year college located east of Honolulu, Hawaii. His primary interests are curriculum design and use of video materials for language learning.