Integrating Language and Content: Lessons from an Immersion Program, Bayswater South Primary School

Introduction

Integrated language and content instruction provides opportunities for students to acquire a new language through the study of discipline-based learning domains such as Science, Mathematics, The Humanities, and The Arts.

Bayswater South Primary School has just celebrated 30 years of excellence in bilingual education. The implementation of the bilingual immersion program at Bayswater South Primary School suggests at least three elements of general relevance for second language instruction:

1. Language instructional approaches that integrate content and language are likely to be more effective than approaches in which language is taught in isolation.

2. A content-based approach provides relevance and context to the children's language learning and thus aids both their first and second language acquisition and their academic achievement in other domains.

3. Language objectives should be systematically targeted along with learning objectives of relevant domains in order to maximise language learning.

German, Science, The Arts, Mathematics and The Humanities are domains of the Discipline-based Learning strand which have been at the core of the Bayswater South Primary School bilingual immersion program since the introduction of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS).

Key elements of the Standards by which student achievement and progress are measured are firmly embedded in the school's language teaching and learning practices.

For example, as students work towards the achievement of standards in Science, they work towards the achievement of standards in German. Students use oral language (both general and science- specific) in a range of activities, such as:

- to describe their activities and observations
- to engage in discussions to generate questions
- to make predictions and formulate conclusions.

Students then use written language to label pictures and diagrams, to record observations and draw up charts, as well as to report on experiments and outcomes. They work collaboratively on projects and experiments, engage in problem-solving activities and are encouraged to become independent thinkers. High engagement of students and especially boys has been achieved through the teaching of hands-on, activity-based Science and Technology lessons.

The Arts and The Humanities domains also present themselves as excellent vehicles for developing and extending Intercultural Understandings. By building upon 'the known', eliciting similarities and contrasts, and engaging in constructive and open-ended discussions, the students not only develop social and cultural understanding, but also gain awareness of culturally appropriate language and behaviours.

Lessons to be learned

The first lesson to be learned from the implementation of the German bilingual immersion program at Bayswater South Primary School is that when the teaching of a language is integrated with the teaching of discipline-based learning domains, it is more effective than teaching the language in isolation. Proficiency in the language is not a prerequisite to academic development, rather, the acquisition of the language results from using the language to perform authentic communication functions.

The primary focus of immersion is not language learning but content instruction. The Bayswater South Primary School partial immersion program has been proven by many studies to be a successful model for integrated German and content instruction, and their results demonstrate that the achievement of immersion students is comparable to, or better than, that of like-school students educated through English only. This also indicates that the students in immersion programs acquire the second language skills they need to master the learning content appropriate for their stage of learning.

The second lesson learned from the bilingual immersion program is that the use of teaching strategies and tasks that encourage increased interaction among students and between students and teachers is beneficial for second language learning.

Teachers involved in the bilingual immersion program at Bayswater South Primary School ensure that students are given the opportunity to acquire skills and understandings that prepare them for future learning. Activities are designed to stimulate lateral thinking skills, for example through awareness and inclusion of the essentials of Bloom's Taxonomy, De Bono's Thinking Hats and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences.

Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12

The Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12 in practice are evident in the implementation of the bilingual immersion program at Bayswater South Primary School. Teachers are actively promoting the development of problem-solving, higher-order thinking and risk-taking skills.

For example, as students engage in exploratory tasks or experiments, they are encouraged to contribute ideas and express their ideas in German although there is some risk of making language mistakes. Students are also challenged to explore, question and engage with significant ideas and practices, so that they move beyond superficial understandings to develop higher order, flexible thinking. For instance, Grade 3 students conduct experiments demonstrating the relationship between sunlight and growth. They plant seedlings and observe and record growth of plants with and without sunlight. Students are encouraged to predict what might happen and verify or give reasons why it didn't happen.

The connectedness of the students to the broader community provides them with the opportunity to enhance their real-life experiences of linguistic and cultural awareness. To provide students with such learning experience, teachers plan for interaction with local German-speaking residents at the Tabulam and Templer Homes for the Aged. These visits provide students with the opportunity to use their language skills in different situations. The school has also formed strong links with a German company, Siemens. In addition, the school hosts regular visits from students, teachers, academics and overseas visitors.

The third lesson to be learned is that the integration of language and learning objectives of the relevant domains should be carefully planned, providing for the presentation, practice, and application of specific language forms that are necessary for discussing different content.

In an effort to make learning content as comprehensible as possible, teachers involved in the partial immersion program adopt communication strategies that rely on linguistic skills their students already have or are developing. Teachers also progressively model more complex language and use instructional activities that demand more complex language skills from students to ensure that they have the opportunities to develop their language skills fully.

Instructional strategies and tasks are carefully selected so that students use and learn targeted aspects of the language. Such systematic plans are used to ensure the provision of consistent information about language forms and to allow students to progressively acquire the targeted grammatical features.

Conclusion

Experiences in bilingual immersion classes illuminate the practice of second language teaching and indicate effective ways of attaining high levels of academic content mastery and target language proficiency.

Incorporating content-based instruction into primary and secondary school languages classrooms is a way of ensuring a meaningful context for language instruction while at the same time providing a vehicle for developing knowledge and skills specified in other curriculum areas. Teaching through content is fun and worthwhile for both the students and the teacher. Although it takes more time to plan and create materials for content-based instruction, the results are well worth the effort.

Suggestions for planning lessons that integrate language and content instruction

When planning for the integration of language and content instruction, the distinctive characteristics and needs of students found at each level of cognitive and educational development must be considered. Who are the students? What is the range of their social and cognitive development? What are they interested in?

Second language acquisition research informs us about the value of teaching strategies such as providing comprehensible input, planning many listening activities, and giving the students numerous opportunities to use their language and to gain meaning.

The following are suggestions for languages teachers when planning lessons that integrate language and content:

- become familiar with the regular classroom curriculum by observing your students' regular classrooms, talk to the teachers about their curriculum and to the students about what they are studying.

- plan to integrate content that you are interested in. Start on a small scale and select only one or two topics from the regular curriculum.

- use a web or a curriculum planning format that promotes the integration of language, content, and culture.

- design learning activities which focus on the following:

    o   using students' prior knowledge and personal experience.

    o   allowing students to work individually and in groups (whole class, small groups and in pairs)

    o   using holistic strategies that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing and

    o   naturally connecting language and content

    o   challenging students to think critically

    o   addressing students' multiple ways of learning.

Further information, specific units of work and how to implement them may be found in the book *Room for Two*, by Sue Fernandez. *Room for Two* and other books about bilingual educations are available in the Languages and Multicultural Education Resources Centre (LMERC). Information about resources at LMERC can be obtained by email at lmerc.library@edumail.vic.gov.au

For further information about Bayswater South Primary School Bilingual (English - German) Partial Immersion Program, please contact:

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