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Content AND language teaching? How do New Zealand teachers support students learning English as an additional language?

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Background

There has been a gradual but marked change in approach to teaching students for whom English is an additional language (EAL students) in New Zealand secondary schools. Until recently, EAL students were usually secluded from mainstream classes and taught in specialist (ESOL) classes until they were considered to have mastered sufficient English language to manage curriculum learning. Achievement for these students was measured using alternative English or sometimes English as a foreign language (EFL) assessments. ESOL teachers regularly moved into this area from a background in teaching curriculum English or perhaps from teaching in primary schools.

Over the past 30 years New Zealand student demographics have diversified in the same way as in many other English-speaking countries. In response to this growing student diversity, and to research on how students learn an additional language in the setting of a secondary school, the approach to teaching EAL students has gradually changed direction. The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) now states that it is the responsibility of all teachers to explicitly teach the language of their subject concurrently with the content of that subject. This expectation has raised concerns about the roles of both ESOL teachers and curriculum teachers.

Whereas ESOL teachers once had the relatively clear role of teaching their EAL students until they had a basic grounding in general English, now ESOL teachers are encouraged to support these students to learn other subjects through the medium of academic English. Achievement for EAL students is now measured by their success in curriculum subjects. This places demands on ESOL teachers' knowledge of school curricula. At the same time, curriculum teachers have been asked to be explicit in teaching the language of their subject. This places demands on their knowledge of how languages are learnt and should be taught. Neither ESOL nor curriculum teachers have come to terms with their new roles.

Research Questions

1. How do subject teachers in New Zealand approach language teaching in the context of their curriculum classes?
2. How do ESOL teachers in New Zealand see their changing role?
3. How do both sets of teachers view the prospect of teacher professional development and collaboration

Methods

This study draws upon literature in the areas of:

1. New Zealand's historical approaches to teaching ESOL (Franken & McComish, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2007). This literature shows development from ad hoc to systematic approaches for teaching EAL students and, latterly, uncertainty about how to implement the requirements of the new New Zealand Curriculum (2007).

2. Content-based language teaching. This illustrates how international approaches to teaching language through curriculum content have evolved into variations of sheltered and coordinated content and language programmes using such models as Content based language teaching or CBLT

(Genesee, 1994; Grabe & Stoller, 1997) and the Sheltered instruction observation protocol or SIOP (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008).

3. The pedagogical content knowledge used by curriculum teachers within their discipline (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Shulman, 2000) and the strong belief system attached to individual disciplines (Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995).

4. International models for sharing interdisciplinary knowledge (Arkoudis, 2003, 2006; Creese, 2000, 2005, 2006; Davison, 2006; Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008, Leung, 2001, 2003). These studies explore the logistical and pedagogical challenges of managing collaboration amongst ESOL and curriculum teachers.

The research questions were investigated using two sets of participants. Both sets of participants were selected purposively in order to provide a qualitative snapshot of the New Zealand context as opposed to a generalisable survey. A case study approach enabled seven teachers in different curriculum areas to describe and demonstrate how best to support EAL students in their senior secondary school classes. A focus group allowed ESOL teachers to discuss their role in teaching EAL students. This paper draws on data from both groups of teachers.

Frame

This paper has a socio-cultural theoretical framework. The underlying assumption is that learning an additional language at school is a cooperative endeavour between learner and learner, learner and teacher, and, in the context of teaching EAL students in New Zealand secondary schools, potentially between teacher and teacher. Accordingly, the data generated by the two parts of this study were analysed using qualitative methods to capture salient themes underpinning teachers' beliefs.

Research findings

There is no silver bullet for this issue. Research suggests that it is meaningful and advantageous for students to learn language in the context of curriculum content but also admits that this is a huge challenge for teachers, schools and even ministries of education to manage. The research findings suggest that:

- Curriculum teachers may not realise that there is a body of knowledge to inform teaching of EAL students in mainstream subjects. They don't know what they don't know.
- There is no ESOL curriculum in New Zealand and lacking a curriculum may invalidate or undermine ESOL teachers' expertise.
- ESOL teachers may not feel confident in becoming teachers of academic language in diverse curriculum areas.
- ESOL teachers may not have a secure grasp of how students learn language through curriculum content
- School managers may not appreciate the value of employing fully trained ESOL teachers

International studies offer various models that attempt to address the problem of managing two different learning areas. However none of these has been without challenges. These include:

- Sheltered or integrated instruction that draws upon one or more teacher 's expertise in the areas of language development and content instruction
- Collaboration between language and curriculum specialists which may involve co-planning and/or co-teaching

It would appear that intensive professional development is necessary to clarify the roles and relationship between subject and language teachers.

