INTEGRATING SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING INTO THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Lois M. Precup, Coordinator
Second Language Instruction
American School Foundation
Mexico City, Mexico

Test your E. S. L. I. Q.* What do the following learning activities have in common: nailing an imaginary picture to the wall; placing objects in different locations in the classroom; pantomiming the baking of a cake; repeating the description of animal actions pictured on cards; discussing a recipe; playing a game of charades?

You can't figure out the common element among these activities? Then your E. S. L. I. Q. is not very high. But that is not necessarily cause for alarm. It often appears that the lower the educator's E. S. L. I. Q., the higher is his level of commitment to integrated and meaningful learning.

Most educators would be hard pressed to identify any common element in the assortment of activities listed above - unless these educators were also the authors, teachers, or administrators of typical second language instructional programs for children. Only educators or linguists steeped in the vast quantity of commercial materials available for teaching a second language to children would think to unite such a conglomeration of activities into one teaching unit or lesson plan. Their justification would be that all these activities have a structural unity; that is, they all "practice the present progressive tense." An educator whose background is curriculum development or even language development will wonder what meaning is conveyed to a child who practices the present progressive tense while his thinking processes are leaping disjointedly from repeating animal actions to baking a cake. And the child, ... pity the child who tries to identify some meaningful connection between monkeys swinging in a tree and cake batter rising in an imaginary oven!

I have long puzzled over the fact that methodologies and learning theories which are questioned or even rejected in other areas of teaching, are considered acceptable and even beneficial in second language teaching. Most educators would turn thumbs down to a methodology of rote memorization and constant repetition of multiplication tables or other specific facts and figures, except for limited periods of time and for clearly defined purposes. Learning such facts and specifics is only meaningful, teachers

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*English as a Second Language Intelligence Quotient

objectives appropriate to their varying levels of English proficiency.

The American School Foundation is totally bilingual at the elementary level. One thousand students in grades one through five spend half of their day with Mexican teachers studying Spanish language arts, social studies, science and physical education in Spanish. The other half of their day is spent in English studying English language arts, social studies, mathematics and music with native English-speaking teachers. For many years the school has provided E. S. L. instruction for children whose English is below the proficiency level for their age and grade. A half-hour pull-out E. S. L. program is provided daily during the English half day. Presently it is the specialized E. S. L. teachers who are developing integrated instructional units in order to place language practice into proper perspective in relation to language use. The ultimate goal, however, is to train all the English-speaking teachers to integrate curricular concepts and second language objectives into the teaching units of the regular classroom.

What is an integrated teaching unit? How does one integrate second language objectives into the curriculum of the elementary school? What are the advantages, or disadvantages, of such a methodology?

Recently I developed a new integrated unit for the first graders I teach. The process of unit development was the following:

1. As the previous unit was coming to an end, I met with the children's regular English classroom teacher for planning. She described for me in detail the concepts and skills with which the children were working in the various content areas of the regular curriculum. She informed me that the children were about to enter a new social studies section concerning the home. Social studies tends to provide the conceptual framework for our E. S. L. integrated units, though concepts derived from other content areas are also reinforced when appropriate. In dialogue with the teacher, general patterns in the children's academic development, as well as needs of small groups or individual children, were identified.

2. A unit theme was selected and concepts to be focused upon in the unit were identified. Based upon the teacher's comments, a theme concerning the home was selected. The theme actually was expressed in the form of questions which the children were interested in answering. Questions can be formulated by the teacher, but are better if elicited from the children. Some questions identified for this unit were: Why do we live in homes? What are the parts of a house? What can/can't we do inside/outside of the house? Are all houses alike? How are they different? Why do we need rules at home?

Based upon the questions formulated, a set of concepts for the unit were defined. Some of the concepts identified for this unit were:

a. Everyone has a home, though homes around the world are different.

would claim, if the children immediately use this learning to gain a better understanding of themselves, their world, its history and its physical laws. Why is it, then, that in second language teaching the generally unacceptable is accepted? Children are often expected to mimic, memorize, and repeatedly practice isolated language structures or routines, apart from a conceptual learning framework which gives meaning to their oral expression.

Consider now a different set of learning activities. Can you identify a common element among the following: describing the actions of persons in photographs and classifying the photos according to whether they were taken inside or outside a house; pantomiming the students' morning activities at home; discussing a book which shows "whacky" absurdities in each room of a home; discussing and dramatizing the nursery rhyme "The Old Woman who Lived in the Shoe" and then writing an experience chart about her life in the shoe; describing and contrasting dream homes which the children have built with blocks, popcycle sticks, or carton boxes?

Though these are only five isolated activities taken from a complete teaching unit, it is hoped that their common element is evident to the reader. Home related concepts such as the parts of a house, activities in a house, and household objects and their uses, are basic to all of these activities. Additionally, a limited set of second language skills and structures are purposefully elicited by these activities. These second language skills include a review of the present progressive, basic descriptive statements and negative statements in the present tense, natural practice with prepositions of location (in, on, under, etc.), and introduction/review of vocabulary words and concepts such as inside, outside, drawer, porch, etc.

The debate over focus on language versus focus on concepts in second language methodology is not new. Studies of second language learning in Montreal and elsewhere have for years encouraged schools to stop wasting valuable learning time on "teaching the second language". These studies have suggested that children can become as proficient, or even more proficient, in the second language in programs where the second language is used as the language of instruction, with virtually no time spent on specific second language teaching efforts. While there are reasons to question the direct applicability of such international research findings to the political and sociological reality of second language education in the United States, it is educationally foolhardy to ignore the insights into second language teaching and learning which these studies permit.

At the American School Foundation in Mexico City, we are trying to bring the concerns of language practice and language use together. For the last two years, we have taught and reinforced English as a second language skills through content-based units developed around the regular elementary curriculum. Integrated into these units are learning concepts appropriate to the age and developmental level of the students, as well as second language

b. Homes are made of different materials, depending upon the resources of the environment.
c. There are five parts to most homes: roof, floor, walls, doors, windows.
d. Some activities we do only at home, while other activities we might do at home, at school, outside, etc.
e. There are safety rules at home.
f. We put things away at home in particular places.

3. A limited number of specific second language objectives were identified and defined in the unit. These objectives were based upon the language needs and capabilities of the students. At the American School Foundation, E.S.L. first graders have a considerable degree of English comprehension ability, but their production abilities are varied and often limited. Most E.S.L. first graders dominate few, if any, English oral structures, though they generally are able to communicate their thoughts in hesitant, inaccurate English. Some of the second language objectives identified for these children are listed below. The language samples are only examples of the kind of language which the children are guided and enabled to spontaneously produce.

a. The children will formulate declarative and negative sentences, questions and short answers, using the simple present tense:

Declarative: "This house has a floor, walls, and windows."
Negative: "It doesn't have a roof or a door!"
Question: "Can you go inside this house?"
Short answer: "Yes, you can. - Climb over the wall!"

b. The children will use prepositions of location: "There's an umbrella on the couch. We put it away in the closet."

c. The children will use the vocabulary words and concepts concerning the home: "We put food in it. What is it? -- It's the oven (refrigerator, picnic basket, etc.)"

The number of second language objectives for any unit is limited. This allows the same few language structures and skills to be woven and re-woven into the variety of activities which teach the unit concepts. It is the teacher's skill and guidance which allows a variety of concept-based activities to naturally elicit children's creative language based upon a limited number of language structures.

4. An identification was made of the specific language skills and other skills which it was hoped the children would perform upon completion of the unit. The list of specific skills was a natural product of the unit concepts and the second language objectives. For example, one concept to be conveyed by the unit was that there are safety rules at home. Based on this

concept, three specific skills were defined:

The children will...
a. state five rules to make our homes safer;
b. describe why these rules were important for home safety;
c. decide whether the same rules were important safety rules for the classroom.

Another concept of the unit was that most homes have five parts: roof, floor, walls, doors, and windows. This concept, together with the unit's second language objectives, resulted in several specific skills:

The children will...
a. point to the part of a house named orally by the teacher or another student;
b. verbalize the names of the parts of a house indicated by the teacher or another student;
c. identify the house among several houses which was orally described;
d. describe the missing parts of absurd houses.

5. A resource list of activities was created which would guide the children to develop the skills, grasp the concepts, and dominate the language objectives of the unit. This is where the true creativity of the integrated unit happens, but seldom is that creativity a spontaneous thing. Rather, it is the result of careful, thoughtful, yet flexible planning.

Often a given activity could elicit a variety of language structures from the children. Sometimes that kind of language freedom is valuable, to permit new learners to try out their linguistic wings. However, it is also possible for the teacher to direct the children's natural responses toward the second language objectives of the unit. For example, a large color visual of a family building a tree house provides the opportunity for a variety of language. Any of the following comments, and many others, could flow from E.S.L. first graders when discussing this visual. Undoubtedly, however, their renditions would be structurally and grammatically inaccurate.

a. The man is building a ladder.
b. Doesn't it have a bathroom?
c. The boy doesn't want the girl to climb up.
d. My dad built me a tree house.
e. I wish I could live in a house like that!

Several of these comments would be difficult, if not impossible, for the children to express in their second language. Therefore, the teacher may guide the discussion toward a certain language objective, or several objectives. In this instance, the teacher might proceed with a series of questions,

allowing many children the opportunity to respond to each question:

a. What's happening in this picture? (PRESENT PROGRESSIVE responses: "The man is sawing; The boy is bringing nails; etc.")
b. Why do you think they're doing those things? (SIMPLE PRESENT responses: "He wants to cut the board; The boy needs nails to make a ladder; etc.")
c. What are some things you can do in a tree house? (structure with CAN: "You can sleep; You can hide from your mom; etc.")
d. What are some things you can't do in a tree house? (negative structure with CAN'T: "You can't take a bath; You can't jump up and down, or it will fall down; etc.")

This sets the scene for a great amount of structural repetition in the second language, while the children are nevertheless creatively expressing their thoughts about the visual.

In some cases, a certain activity so motivates a particular language structure that wild horses could not keep the children from producing it. The teacher's insight here is simply to use such activities to their best advantage. My experience with first graders indicates that absurdities produce such a reaction in elementary children. A visual with absurd missing parts will immediately call from the children a comment about what is missing: "That house doesn't have a roof!", or "The kitchen table doesn't have a leg!" Other absurdities will demand incongruous descriptive statements: "The man is taking a bath outside under a tree!", or "There's a rabbit in the birdcage!" A teacher has only to watch the eager enthusiasm and enjoyment of the children as they discover and describe such absurdities to know why these activities should be chosen over activities which only grudgingly permit the teacher to cajole the children to produce these same structures (i.e., Children, here's a picture of the White House. Does it have a door? How many walls do you see?)

6. Built into the integrated unit were opportunities for evaluating the children's progress with the concepts, skills and second language objectives. The unit was planned so that progress in each of these three areas can be distinguished, in order to better meet children's individual needs. Often instructional activities were used at a later time for evaluative purposes. Other activities resulted in products (tape recordings, experience charts, etc.) which provided a measure of the children's language, concept, and skill development. While evaluation for purposes of teacher planning was considered very important, every effort was made to maintain evaluation as a continuing, subtle process. This was done to permit the children's language and intellectual development to proceed at their own paces without unnecessary anxiety to hinder progress.

What are the results when integrated units are used with second language students? I leave that to you to measure in your students' concept and language development, as I have repeatedly in mine. I encourage you to measure the results, too, in the motivation and enthusiasm of your students. Meaningful learning, and perhaps a spark of magic, can happen when second language practice and second language use are creatively mingled in an integrated, content-based unit in the elementary school.