

The SIOP Model: Transforming the Experiences of College Professors

Part I. Lesson Planning, Building Background, and Comprehensible Input¹

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Abstract

This article, the first of two, presents the introduction, context, and analysis of professor experiences in an on-going research project for implementing a new educational model in a bilingual teacher's college in Bogotá, Colombia. The model, the sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP) promotes eight components for a bilingual education program. These components will be analyzed to discern what educators found to be easy or challenging in their classroom teaching practice.

Keywords: sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP), English second language learners (ESLLs), Colombian National Education Department, content subject, meaningful activities, supplementary materials (SMs)

Resumen

Este artículo, el primero de dos, presenta la introducción, el contexto, y el análisis de las experiencias profesoriales en un proyecto de investigación continuo para la implementación de un nuevo modelo educativo en una universidad de formación docente en educación bilingüe³ en Bogotá, Colombia. El modelo, el

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³ Nota del editor: Siendo que entre los países de América Latina la terminología de los niveles de estudio (como bachillerato, técnico, pre-grado, etc.) se varía bastante, se aclara que, en Colombia, el término que se usa oficialmente para la universidad descrita en la investigación es *institución universitaria*. También, según términos educacionales colombianos, el programa que se ofrece es *profesional*, que quiere decir que dura 10 semestres. El título ofrecido por la universidad descrita en este artículo es la de *licenciatura en educación bilingüe*. (En otros países hispanos tal vez se usaría los términos *escuela normal* o *estudio de magisterio*, los cuales normalmente se traducen al inglés como *teacher's college* o *normal school*).

protocolo de observación de la instrucción protegida (SIOP), promueve ocho componentes para un programa de educación bilingüe. Éstos serán analizados para discernir lo que los educadores encontraron fácil o desafiante en su práctica docente en el aula.

Palabras claves: protocolo de observación de la instrucción protegida (SIOP), aprendizaje de inglés como segunda lengua (ESLLs), Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, materia de contenido, actividades significativas, materiales suplementarios

The SIOP is an educational model and procedure which focuses on teaching language through a content-based approach. Those who designed it propose that educators give ESLLs a protected environment in which these students may safely build second language (L2) skills without abandoning their first language in the process. The protocol is designed to encourage students to employ their native language to support the learning process, particularly when moving from concrete to abstract knowledge. This model was developed from 1996 to 2003 by researchers of the Center for Applied Linguistics and California State University using data from exemplary US teachers. The protocol is composed of eight interrelated components: lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice/application, lesson delivery, and review/assessment.

The Center for Applied Linguistics (2010) defines SIOP as an instructional research-based and validated framework that trains and coaches teachers through concrete examples on key features of effective high-quality sheltered teaching techniques. One of the main goals of this model is to help English learners to be successful in content classes and L2 skills. Additionally, it is used as an observation instrument to assess the implementation of effective strategies, their effects on students, and as a tool to be used by teachers in the planning and delivery of lessons. The model has been used and tested by elementary, secondary, two-way immersion, and bilingual teachers as well as school and district administrators (SIOP Institute, 2008).

The teacher's college *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana*⁴ has promoted the SIOP model as a framework for their professors' class preparation since 2007. The model matches what the administration considers to be an effective teaching model. The school has used the *content-based approach*, which is the philosophical groundwork for SIOP, since 2004. The model is based on eight

⁴ The school, otherwise known as *ÚNICA*, is a Spanish-English teacher's college located in Bogotá, Colombia, with a bilingual teacher certification program designed to prepare future educators, researchers, and educational administrators.

components which are applicable during lesson preparation as well as delivery. It has been demonstrated by researchers that students can learn English and content concepts much more easily when professors are implementing the model (Short & Echevarria, 1999).

Context

From its inception, the college's administration and faculty have aimed at constructing a coherent program that included content in the fields of education, linguistics, research, history, and literature. In the first faculty meetings, one issue discussed was the importance of providing solid language-skill acquisition to the students while teaching through content. Students have to graduate with a B2 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)⁵ level, in accordance with the National Bilingual Program's requirements for college students (*Ministerio de Educación Nacional*, 2007). The CEFR indicates that someone on the B2 level can understand the most important ideas of complex texts and technical conversations in his/her particular area of expertise. In addition, this person will be able to express his/her ideas on a high-intermediate level of fluency, capable of interacting with native speakers, and of generating detailed writings on a variety of topics (Council of Europe, 2001).

Currently, the college's professors are teaching English skills through content, that is, subject courses such as educational research, language and society, or North American literature, as well as through language courses (English, writing, etc.) It has always been a challenge for the faculty to develop a project in which all agree upon a single method for accomplishing specific language and content objectives in the classrooms, which is why early in 2008 a group of professors and students began a research project to understand how the SIOP model could help the student body to accomplish language and content objectives in class. It was believed that the SIOP model would provide some key strategies that can scaffold student academic processes so that they would be well prepared as students and future teachers (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

This research project was carried out with five senior professors who voluntarily offered to participate. At the time, they were teaching content classes in the fields of education, research, and history. The classes observed were of groups from the fourth to eighth semester of study. One of these professors was a native English speaker while the others were non-native English speakers.

⁵ The CEFR is a guideline that provides standards of language ability and skills in order for language learners to communicate (Council of Europe, 2001).

Area of Focus

This research is an attempt to describe the experience of college professors as they apply the first three SIOP model components (lesson preparation, building background, and comprehensible input). The description will take into account the aspects of SIOP which professors were able to master. It will also define those factors which were both difficult and/or easy in the process of mastering those aspects.

Research Questions

1. What did professors learn using the SIOP model in their classes?
2. What were the components of the SIOP model which professors found more challenging to apply?
3. What were the components of the SIOP model which professors found easier to apply?

Data Collection and Data Sources

The data was collected by using five different sources:

- a) Professor's reflections: The research group organized meetings twice a month to analyze each of the SIOP model components. In these meetings, professors were asked to write down reflections about their experience with the model.
- b) Video-tape checklists: Classroom visits were made by researchers in order to observe how professors were using the SIOP model. To gather data, researchers used the checklist provided in Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004). This checklist is composed of 30 features organized around the 8 SIOP components. Each item provides a score from 0 to 4, ranging from *highly evident*, and *somewhat evident*, to *not evident*.
- c) Video and tape transcriptions (from both meetings and classes): All meetings were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Afterwards, the transcriptions were analyzed in order to collect data. All classes were videotaped (Mills, 2003).
- d) Surveys: During the process, the researchers collected some data through surveys which they sent to professors via e-mail. The professors answered the research questions based on their experience with using the SIOP components in their lessons.
- e) Lesson plans: All professors participating in the research project handed in lesson plans (of videotaped classes) to the researchers.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

To analyze the collected data, the researchers identified and compared the items of the SIOP components through professors' reflections, video-tape checklists, tape transcriptions, surveys, and lesson plans (Mills, 2003). For the first part of this study, the research took into

account lesson preparation, building background, and comprehensible input: the first three components of the SIOP model.

Lesson Preparation

Lesson preparation (LP) is the first of the eight main components that the SIOP model suggests that educators use. According to the theory, effective lessons are ones that lead students towards clear objectives. These objectives should be both stated orally by the teacher and presented in written form to the class. In addition, lesson planning should promote learning in which students link new concepts with past knowledge/experiences. This objective is often reached through the use of supplementary materials (SMs), content adaptation, and meaningful activities. It is suggested that the implementation of this element in a teachers' daily practice will improve not only the class quality, but also the depth of their students' learning processes (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

What has been easy for professors when preparing classes with the SIOP model? After analyzing the SIOP checklists, the tape transcriptions of the focus groups, and the professors' reflections, the researchers were able to draw the conclusion that most professors plan their classes taking SMs into account. Although the professors expressed some initial confusion about (for example) the difference between materials and *supplementary* materials, they obtained greater clarity on the issue after undergoing SIOP training activities.

One professor pointed out that his use of SMs helped students to become more engaged in class and that SMs assisted him in class management. Another professor revealed that he normally did not use SMs. He expressed his belief that the successful use of such materials depends on teaching styles. He considered the most important issue concerning SMs to be for teachers to focus their attention on what is necessary for accomplishing the class goals, and not focusing on the materials themselves. The majority of professors thought that SMs must be those which will be useful in enhancing student's learning. According to the checklist comments, some of the materials professors used the most included: videos, graphic organizers, posters, and Power Point presentations.

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Another aspect of SIOP which professors applied and found easy to use in their classes was what we call *meaningful activities*. Based on the SIOP checklists, professors planned lessons to tie in students' previous-knowledge base with the new information being presented in class. These lessons gave them opportunities to enhance language development in reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, as is made clear in the following example taken from a survey:

A meaningful activity for me after learning about the SIOP model is the one that includes the four skills. For Microteaching class, students have to read and write a summary of the reading. After that, we talk about it (the summary), so they have to listen and to speak.

Most professors demonstrated that they have a clear understanding of how to adapt content concepts to meet student needs. Evidence of such is seen in the following statements taken from both a survey as well as an observer's comments on the checklists, respectively:

I usually read the texts and see how difficult the vocabulary and concepts are to later be able to explain or clarify them to students.

[One professor adapts content concepts] . . . by trying to look for examples related to the students' own lives and Colombia's culture.

What has been challenging for professors when preparing classes with the SIOP model? The main difficulties professors have faced when preparing classes with the SIOP model are related to writing out the content and language objectives. The following reflection shows that a professor found the writing of these objectives to be difficult:

Ha sido un poco difícil enunciar los objetivos. Me toma mucho tiempo y sigo preguntándome si la manera de enunciarlos es la más apropiada (si un objetivo de contenido como “entender _____” o “ganar mayor comprensión en _____” son todavía muy poco concretos, por ejemplo). También me pregunto si realmente los estudiantes comprenden lo que se busca, si no estoy confundiendo los objetivos de lengua con los de contenido, si los objetivos son más bien actividades o tareas, si los objetivos son demasiado ambiciosos o muy pobres en exigencia para el nivel [de los estudiantes], si son coherentes con las actividades . . .⁶

What have professors learned about preparing classes with the SIOP model? Upon analyzing data from the reflections, the focus groups, and the checklists, the researchers were able to draw a significant conclusion about what professors learned about the first component of SIOP, lesson preparation. The conclusion was that the new

⁶ [It has been a little difficult to state objectives. It takes a lot of time and I still wonder if the way I state them is the most appropriate (if a content objective such as “understand _____” or “get more understanding in _____” are still not concrete enough, for example). I also wonder whether students understand what is expected; whether I am not confusing language with content objectives; whether the objectives are, instead, activities or tasks; whether the objectives are too ambitious or not demanding enough for the (students') level; whether they are coherent with the activities . . .]

knowledge acquired by the professors is, in fact, related to one of the sub-components of LP: establishing language/content objectives. This was a significant finding in that it showed that professors have gained a consciousness about having both content and language covered in their classes at the same level. The balance between these two factors is not frequently obtained in the pedagogical strategies of college professors.

Some professors said that they had never thought much about the importance of working on content and language objectives together. The new edition of the SIOP manual (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004) is quite specific regarding the focus of the language objectives. These objectives can focus on explicit grammar points or higher-order thinking skills to enhance student's vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Also, the manual gives key vocabulary for presenting language objectives. Educators are encouraged to use verbs such as *brainstorm*, *outline*, *revise*, *edit*, *conclude*, *summarize*, and phrases such as *make comparisons*.

Building Background

Building background (BB) is the second element of the SIOP model. It offers strategies for linking students' personal and cultural context to the lesson being given. Rightly understood, it is said to be able to help the teacher to be more conscientious of the existing knowledge gaps their second language learners (SLLs) may have. This SIOP component is the basis for several techniques which may be used by a professor to introduce vocabulary before, during, and after the lesson. It offers guidelines so that a teacher may connect students' prior knowledge with the new information being taught. Building background is a proposal for a variety of classroom methods to be used for tying a text's background information to student's realities (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). If followed as a principle, it also aides in the difficult task of prompting students to build background for themselves. The lesson application of this component is crucial because it is the primary element to be used to engage students with lesson content, making the lesson attractive to students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

What has been easy for professors when building background using the SIOP model? According to SIOP checklists, the focus groups, and the BB reflections, every one of the professors was found to be connecting class concepts to student background during the observation period. In the focus group meetings, all professors agreed that they as well as students should "construct" the classes together. What they meant by "construct" was that most of them thought that professors should give students the chance to feel like active participants and not just like the objects of a lesson. They agreed that students should not only receive classes, but that they should actively contribute.

Using students as instruments to build background means that ideas shared in class should come principally from students. Regarding this, one professor observed that BB has not only made her classes easier, but that it has become easier to apply BB from the very first time that she encouraged her students to actively participate. Students tend to catch on to it quickly. The professor stated: “In Microteaching class, I have students think about when they were teenagers, so, that way they can connect their previous experiences with the new information about adolescence.”

Professors seek to connect concepts to student’s background, and the way they do this is mainly through discussions. The next two quotes exemplify this fact:

When we did the class on myths, students had to tell their own stories first, and then we were prepared to talk about Indian myths.

Once I have explained a concept, I try to elicit information from students by asking them concrete questions like: Do we experience this phenomenon (code-switching, for example) in our own country? Students normally come up with great ideas. If they look mixed-up, I then give them some examples from my own life. E.g. ‘When I was studying English I code-switched when I said _____.’

What has been challenging for professors when building background? When talking about challenging aspects for BB in classes, the data showed us that two professors had difficulties related to time. One of them had trouble estimating the time to allot for each component in a class. The other considered that the time for planning and organizing was overwhelming.

Another aspect challenging for professors of BB was related to *key vocabulary*, a list of words used to help students understand class content. On the checklists and during the BB focus groups, professors demonstrated some confusion related to this topic. It was also observed that they placed little emphasis on the use of key vocabulary in their classes. Therefore, the BB research group requested that some professors explain their understanding of the main characteristics of key vocabulary. From the discussion which ensued, one professor expressed that he thought that key vocabulary was essential in reaching content and language objectives:

It’s about the words that are necessary to understand the topic students are studying. In my classes, most of the time, the key vocabulary is included in the language objectives. And [. . .] the language objectives are connected with the content objectives. That means students will

absolutely have to use the key vocabulary if they're going to accomplish the content objectives.

Another professor said that she did not previously know that key vocabulary should be included in the BB component:

Now I know that in our lesson plans we should include key vocabulary when we develop vocabulary and that it's part of the building background component. Now, I'm conscious about it, I wasn't conscious about it previously. I did it, but I didn't know it was part of building background. This activity helped me to realize that.

There was another professor who realized from the SIOP Manual that, for teaching key vocabulary, educators can divide the words into groups according to the level of difficulty and the classification of the word:

The new edition of the SIOP shows more specificity regarding the types of words to teach, both by word area and word level. The first has to do with content and/or topic-specific vocabulary. The second area is function words related to cognitive levels. The third deals with word analysis [. . .] to generate new learning; roots + bases, cognates, compound words. There are also three levels of words classified by tiers. Tier one words are the high-frequency words commonly seen + heard. Tier two are those words used more specifically for academic tasks, such as 'estimate.' The last tier has to do with less common words whose meaning changes based on the context, such as 'power.' In both math and social studies, this word has different meanings.

What have professors learned when building background?

There is evidence that shows that professors were more conscious about some aspects that should be taken into account, than others. Some of the more popular aspects included: the student's age, their knowledge of the world, and their proficiency in the target language. They gave examples about specific activities that can be carried out in order to build background and to create shared understanding in the classroom such as leading the students in a *direct experience*,⁷ forming questions which relate previous knowledge with new, using videos, giving homework, or using readings.

The examples given in Tables 1 to 5, all taken from the lesson plans which the professors who participated in the research designed for videotaped classes, demonstrate different aspects of what they

⁷ To clarify, a *direct experience* is an activity a teacher designs to help students understand different aspects of a task.

learned while building background. The first one, Table 1, shows how a direct experience was described by a professor who was attempting to use BB in her class.

Table 1

BB Exercise: The Happiest Moment of My Life

Content objective:

Students will be able to (SWBAT) identify the characteristics needed to use collaborative learning in class.

Direct experience to build background:

Students will work in pairs. One of them will begin to speak about the happiest moment in his/her life and the other will allow herself to get distracted. After two minutes, the student who is not listening will start paying attention again.

We will talk about the experience and how the student who was speaking felt. This exercise will help students understand what aspects should be taken into account when working with collaborative learning in class.

Forming questions to relate previous knowledge with new is another strategy professors used to build background, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

BB Exercise on Changes Experienced by Teenagers

Content objective:

SWBAT write about five changes teenagers experience. SWBAT write five implications these changes have in the classroom.

- Do you remember how you felt when you were a teenager?
- What was your relationship with adults like?
- Do you remember any particularly happy moment at school?
- What about a sad moment?
- What are the main differences between children's learning process and teenagers'?
- How do you learn English better (in a traditional classroom setting or in a cooperative learning setting)?
- Have you ever tried to win an argument with your parents and lost? What was the argument about? How did they win it?

Using videos, as seen in Table 3, is another technique professors applied to connect the students' previous information with the new content they will assimilate.

Table 3
BB Bilingual Education Video Exercise

<p>Content objective: SWBAT discuss key issues about bilingual education (BE).</p> <p>Language objective: SWBAT write and present an outline about the main characteristics of BE.</p> <p>Building background: Students will watch a video about BE and, in pairs, will discuss the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why are there some people in favor of BE?• Why are some parents opposed to it?• What does research say about it?• How do you relate the situation those schools had experienced with BE to the BE in our country's schools?
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Giving homework, as illustrated in Table 4, was a tool professors were using to connect the information learned in a previous class with the new one.

Table 4
Homework with BB Writing Assignment

<p>Content objective: SWBAT connect their study to relevant learning theories.</p> <p>Language objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• SWBAT draft an essay off of an outline.• SWBAT apply APA-style formatting to parenthetical and reference citation. <p>Homework: Bring in a first draft ready to work on editing it during the next class time.</p>
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Using readings is another strategy teachers used to build background in their classes, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5
BB Readings Exercise

<p>Content objective: SWBAT connect their study to relevant learning theories.</p> <p>Language objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• SWBAT draft an essay off of an outline.• SWBAT apply APA style formatting to parenthetical and reference citation.

Links to learning:

Often, stating facts or using sources from other books or articles helps support your argument. We'll look at how to use support and documentation in a theoretical framework and literature review.

In the focus group meetings, one professor said that using BB had opened the class to more opportunities for student interaction. Another commented that BB has to be used in most classes. He said:

Once you've begun your class this way, it just rolls, and building background motivates students for the whole class.

From my experiences with building background, I have learned that it has to be a method for most classes. If you don't use the method, you can do your class, but perhaps a big part of your student's attention may be lost.

To learn how to build background as a teacher, one of the educators found that doing personal visits with colleagues has been helpful. She got ideas for her own lessons by conversing with professors who were also sampling the BB techniques.

Comprehensible Input

Based on Krashen's hypothesis which states that language acquisition occurs when the input is meaningful, comprehensible, and interesting to the learners (Curtain, 2004), comprehensible input (CI) is a rule which helps educators to bear in mind learners' linguistic needs. In order to make information comprehensible to students, this SIOP recommendation states that teachers should adjust and modulate their speech, explain tasks in steps, and use a variety of simplification techniques. It is believed that, with clear directions and clear communication of what is expected from them, students will perform better academically (McKenzie, 2000).

What has been easy for professors when using CI in their classes? In terms of making content comprehensible, *speech adjustment* was the most predominant strategy used by the professors involved in the research project. The data analysis shows that all of them adjusted the rate, enunciation, and complexity of their speech to their students' levels of proficiency. The techniques that professors applied the most were: speaking slowly, repeating, paraphrasing, using intonation, and recycling (as these examples taken from the surveys and the checklists illustrate):

I speak naturally but slowly, repeat as many times as I see necessary, paraphrase, put emphasis on certain words or expressions and exemplify.

I rephrase and recycle new vocabulary. I use intonation to mark information that is especially important, like key points. I frame new concepts so that students may know what to expect when discussing a particular topic. I also rephrase students' answers.

Another important observation drawn about speech adjustment is that, in general, the professors did not have problems applying the strategy. This was due to the fact that most of them were working with students on a high-intermediate or advanced level. The following comment, taken from a survey, demonstrates this:

In my course, students are advanced. So I don't have to work on the issue of comprehensible input . . . they don't have problems in terms of comprehension. They make mistakes but they understand everything when they read. I mean it's not difficult for them.

With reference to giving class work and/or homework explanations, we found that most professors gave clear instructions for activities or tasks. They usually scaffolded activities, showing examples of their expectations:

I try to model so that students have access to samples of what I expect from them and so that tasks can be grasped easily.

Con el propósito de que los estudiantes comprendan lo que los profesores esperamos de ellos, creo que una muy buena estrategia es la presentación de modelos, es decir, dar a conocer en clase algunos proyectos culminados para que se tenga información detallada de lo que se espera conseguir al finalizar un semestre, una unidad o un módulo temático . . . dichos proyectos culminados sean trabajos de estudiantes de ÚNICA en cursos anteriores . . . al observar los productos de compañeros de semestres anteriores, los estudiantes comprenden con mayor facilidad las tareas, generan debates interesantes a partir de reflexiones de otros, y hasta trabajan en la identificación de dificultades en habilidades como la escritura.⁸

Using a variety of techniques was another element of CI that professors usually applied to make content concepts understandable for

⁸ [With the intention getting students to understand what we as professors expect from them, I think that a very good strategy is showing models, I mean, letting them see some finished projects in class. This is so that they may have detailed information of what we expect them to have done at the end of the semester, a unit or a topic module. . . such finished projects can be projects from ÚNICA students of previous semesters. . . upon observing their peer's work from former semesters, students understand (class/home) work much more easily, it sparks interesting discussions originating in the thoughts of others, and they work on identifying difficulties in skills such as writing].

their students. According to the checklists and surveys, the strategies they used the most were: body language, graphic organizers, and hands-on activities:

Since I am really bad at drawing and I sometimes do not find visual aids appropriate for the topics being presented, I usually use gestures and/or body language to make myself understood.

I give examples, use realia, and design rubrics with students, so they understand what they are supposed to do. With my Intro class [the first-semester English level], I use simple vocabulary and, when necessary, I use Spanish.

Another kind of technique professors applied when using CI in their classes are the communicative ones such as roundtables, symposiums, and panels.

What has been challenging for professors when using CI in their classes? The research did not found data to support that professors were challenged in the use of CI in their classes.

What have professors learned when using CI in their classes? In one of our research meetings, professors were asked to go over one of their lesson plans and to see how they could improve the use of techniques (making content concepts comprehensible for students). One of the professors advised his peers to use strategies different from the ones they usually apply:

We should try to use more demonstrations, or use more videos or maybe pictures . . . because students need it and they also want it . . . and that could make our classroom projects easier and more effective.

Conclusions

In the research meetings and in some of the reflections, professors recognized that using the lesson planning component helped them to think about teaching techniques for guiding students to reach measurable language and content objectives. So, in these meetings they were advised to use Bloom's taxonomy to prepare and deliver their classes. This is particularly important because the teacher's college offers a content-based program in which students also learn English as an L2.

The professors considered that students should be active participants in the construction of the class lesson. Using the BB components and sharing their experiences in the research meetings gave them different ideas about how to implement it in their classes. Using videos, leading students in a direct experience, giving homework, and forming questions which relate previous knowledge with the new were the teaching techniques educators use the most to build background in their classes.

Finally, regarding CI, some professors argued that their instruction should be focused mainly on content, not language, especially when teaching students who have a high-intermediate level of English. The research does not advocate the creation of a content-language dichotomy; in fact, it was found that professors did not have to make any major adjustments to their speech in order to communicate well with students. Still, this fact should not lead professors to dismiss the importance of providing CI to students at all levels. The author considers that language is a path to content concepts, and that both content and language are best understood to be mutually-strengthening aspects of learning.

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