The Need of Attention to Form in Content-Based Instruction

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Content subjects refer to subjects where subject matter is learnt via a second language (Van Patten, 2003, p. 28). Schleppegrell, Achugar and Oteiza (2004, p. 68) explain that the basic notion behind these courses is that the learning of an L2 should happen in conjunction with content. Nevertheless, although a new alternative approach to language learning, content based instruction (CBI) represents a challenge to teachers working with content subjects who have been primarily trained to teach a second language. This is due to two main reasons: teachers' lack of knowledge to teach a second language through content and a lack of knowledge on the subject matter to be taught. This paper focuses on the first issue and reviews the need of attention to form in CBI and the pedagogical practices that could be implemented in these courses in order to pay attention to both form and content in benefit of the learner.

In language programs the integration of content and the L2 has been used since the first half of the 20th century (Ouellet, 1990, as cited in Lyster, 2007 p.8). CBI, different from other L2 instructional options where the only objective is the learning of the target language, aims at helping students to learn content matter and the language itself (Lyster, 2007, p. 2).

This kind of instruction emerged as an alternative to traditional methods which tend to separate language and substantial content (Lyster, 2007, p. 2).

The benefits expected from an attention to form in content subjects are discussed by some researchers (Burger & Chrétien, 2001; Lazuruk, 2007). They claim that the extensive exposure to the target language through the subject matter makes significant gains in learners' input retention and it increases their confidence in using the L2 in real situations. Furthermore, these researchers explain that a focus on the language form in CBI helps students to achieve high levels of language accuracy as well as to create ideal conditions for both language and cognitive development that nurture the relationship between language development and content learning (Lyster, 2007, p.3). Another benefit expected of this teaching approach is that, through the integration of content and a focus on form all the aspects of language knowledge and language skills are covered (Swain, 1996, p. 529).

This approach also claims to provide learners with the cognitive and requisite motivational basis for purposeful communication and a systematic attention to linguistic features. Consequently, this attention

might lead to L2 development (Lyster, 2007, p. 2). In line with this approach Lyster (2007, p. 4) points out that the more often the integration of content and language focus occurs in the classroom, the more likely students will experience opportunities to restructure their current L2 language system, or interlanguage (Ellis, 1997, p. 33).

However, some studies have documented that teachers in CBI courses have a commitment only with content, even when the content is not their area of knowledge. Moreover, the studies reveal that teachers did not see L2 teaching as part of their job during content classes (e.i., Netten, 1991; Södergard 2008; Swain, 1996; Bostwick, 2001; Hoare & Kong, 2008). Thus, content teachers do not see L2 teaching as part of CBI. These studies also show that, when students' understanding of the subject matter or meaning conveyance in production tasks is hindered by L2 language problems in CBI, teachers do not know how to deal with these problems, probably due to a lack of training on the integration of language teaching and subject matter delivery in CBI. Some teachers have been documented to try to overcome these difficulties using the strategies they know from L2 courses. Researchers concluded that, although some L2

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teaching strategies were used, the high importance content teachers give to meaning over language development in subject courses has detrimental effects on L2 development.

The foregoing discussion highlights the importance of driving learners' attention to form during subject-matter courses. This can be done through a proactive (preplanned lesson) and/or a reactive (unplanned teaching opportunities) pedagogical approach during L2 meaning-oriented input (language students are exposed to) and output (language students produce) tasks, in order to foster conditions that push learners to restructure their interlanguage and achieve more accurate representations of the L2.

Some researchers (Ranta & Lyster, 2007; Lyster & Mori, 2006 p.296) explain that, after comparing some studies regarding the effectiveness of different instructional activities in content classes (i.e., Day & Shapton, 1991; Harley, 1989, 1998 as cited in Lyster, 2004b) results show that "the most effective instructional activities included a balanced distribution of opportunities for noticing, language awareness, and controlled practice with feedback". This threefold process includes per se the implementation of input and output opportunities in a reactive/proactive approach since they are seen as determinant for L2 learning to take place in the content based pedagogical practices.

To begin with, theoretical claims and empirical evidence in the field of L2 teaching support the role of input provision in CBI classes. According to Krashen (1982, 1985, as cited in Hall, 2002, p. 91) exposition to the target language is a must if L2 learning is expected to take place. Moreover, as the learners are being exposed to the target language in the content class, pedagogical assistance for helping them notice a particular linguistic feature that

is relevant to them in a content-based class is needed (Doughty & Varela, 1998, p. 115). This pedagogical assistance consists of examining the content of the class in order to identify the most frequent L2 form in that meaning-based context and then design an activity to make the form salient so that the learners can raise their awareness about that specific linguistic form (Lyster & Ranta, 2007).

The kind of tasks the teacher may use to raise learners' awareness of a linguistic form can be either deductive or inductive. In other words, when students have to figure out either the structure or the function of a language feature from language in use to process content, the task is inductive (Dekeyser, 2005, p. 321). On the other hand, if students are given a straightforward explanation of a language feature, then the task is deductive (Dekeyser, 2005, p. 321). Dekeyser (2005, p. 336) claims that, besides being proactive, a focus on language form in L2 teaching is more beneficial if it is inductive since the cognitive processes that take place during an inductive task may lead learners to a deeper awareness of the target meaning-form link. Moreover, it has been shown that inductive tasks may be more motivating for learners than deductive tasks (Ranta & Lyster, 2007, p. 150).

Although noticing plays a first and pivotal role to move learners to more target-like linguistic representations, noticing by it self is not enough to help students restructure their interlanguage (Lyster, 2007, p. 67). According to Swain (1993, as cited in Lyster, 2007, p. 71) and her output hypothesis "through producing the language either spoken or written, language learning may occur". Thus, the inclusion of opportunities for students to produce particular language features during the discussion of content is important to foster L2 development (Swain, 1985, 1993, as cited in Swain & Lapkin, 1995, p. 372).

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Furthermore, it has been suggested that it is through practice that students become aware of what they currently know and, thus, have the opportunity to reconstruct their interlanguage (Ellis, 2003, as cited in Lyster, 2007, p. 81), what may eventually lead them to the proceduralization of this declarative knowledge (Ranta & Lyster, 2007, p. 151). The evidence previously reviewed makes evident that, during the production stage, a reactive approach to drive learners' attention to ill-formed language in their L2 meaning-oriented production is also fundamental. This is because feedback plays a crucial role to ensure that learners complete the production of meaning-oriented tasks including the targeted meaning-form task (Ranta & Lyster, 2007, p.152).

Working in small groups or pairs during the tasks may represent a better and more motivating atmosphere to provide feedback on meaning and form (Doughty & Varela, 1998, p. 136). Although there is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of the different kinds of feedback (Ranta & Lyster, 2007, p. 153), the feedback type that has shown its effectiveness in content meaning lessons is prompts (i.e., Lyster & Izquierdo, 2009; Lyster & Mori, 2006; Lyster, 2004a). This may be due to the fact that when the teacher pushes the learner to self-repair, some mental processes are activated. This process is then

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seen as a practice activity per se and may consequently contribute to learners' proceduralization of declarative knowledge.

As a conclusion, the need of attention to form in CBI goes from motivation to cognitive benefits that could help learners improve their use of the L2 through content. Thus, teachers working with content matter should drive learners' attention to form during subject-matter courses. This may be done through a proactive and/or a reactive pedagogical approach during L2 meaning-oriented input and output tasks, in order to foster conditions that push learners to restructure their interlanguage and achieve more accurate representations of the L2. These tasks should include noticing and language awareness activities along with controlled practice and provision of systematic feedback on the target language feature. Of course, training seems necessary to achieve the highest potential of this quite new CBI approach. Nevertheless, the pedagogical practices presented here might be an option which could be implemented immediately by content teachers.

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