Building on the Foundations of Literacy: Engaging ESL Students in Reading across the Curriculum

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This article will discuss how ESL learners may be engaged in reading across the curriculum through utilizing the foundations of literacy. The discussion will be situated in institutional models which promote positive inter-disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning. It will be argued that the value to these approaches is to be found within those models which promote and support shared best practice between content teachers and language teachers. A curriculum framework supporting this argument will be outlined based on the foundations of literacy. Finally, it will offer examples of successful classroom practice which engage ESL learners when they read across the curriculum.

The foundations of literacy are reading, writing, speaking and listening. They are the keys which open the doors for participation in a literate culture. While they may be artificially broken down for the purposes of an academic discussion they are inevitably linked together, and no one domain exists as a separate entity. This view is also shared by Palmer (2004) who cautions us against developing a pecking order within the foundations of literacy, where learning how to listen, speak and write are intrinsic to the necessary scaffolding required to read well.

Institutional Frameworks

The development of the foundations of literacy is undertaken within various institutional frameworks such as Shaw’s (2005) models outlined below (Table 1). They describe the importance of building upon, and integrating the foundations of literacy into teaching and learning models in order to provide essential scaffolding for ESL learners in their content based courses. Moreover, these exemplars, with the exception of the Direct Content Model, infer that cross-curricular literacy development requires collaboration, cooperation and the explicit sharing of ideas and resources between faculties within any institution.

Table 1. Institutional frameworks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exemplars</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Content Model</td>
<td>Subject material delivered in students’ second language, or third, which could be first or second language of the instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Content Model</td>
<td>Subject matter delivered as above, but teaching is shared by language and subject specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidiary Content Model</td>
<td>Major subject matter delivered by subject specialist in students’ first language. Related subset content taught in the students’ second language by language specialist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Content Model</td>
<td>Team taught bilingual approach by both subject and language specialist who share knowledge of each other’s area of specialization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct Model</td>
<td>Subject material is delivered in second language, and an adjunct class is offered in ESL learner’s first language, to develop the necessary skills and proficiency in the language to ensure success in main course.</td>
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</table>

(Shaw, 2005, pp. 263-4)
Notwithstanding the particular circumstances of any organization, these models of teaching and learning offer pathways to achieving several important institutional outcomes:

1. They offer the most effective utilization of resources in the organization.
2. They promote teamwork and cooperation.
3. They increase the potential for higher achievement levels across language and content disciplines.
4. They promote increased knowledge and skills amongst faculty and support the professional development of its team members.
5. They allow institutions to use them as an indicator as to the kinds of teaching and learning, which may or may not occur, at a cross-curricular level in their respective institutions. (Shaw, 2005)

They also by implication promote curricula which use the foundations of literacy as an integral part of their institutional framework. Such curricula are supportive of language and content based teaching and learning, and are of mutual benefit to all stakeholders - the institution, the teachers and the students.

A Curriculum Framework for Building on the Foundations of Literacy

The curriculum framework described below (Figure 1) places the ESL learner at the centre and is underpinned with a compelling language and content based foundation. There are four connecting strands to this framework. Two of the connectors show the ESL learner supported by language and content based specialists who engage them in a formal learning environment. The remaining two connecting strands may be built upon to ensure that the ESL learner is given opportunities to further develop their skills of literacy outside of a formal learning environment. They could construct their own program of language and content based learning through community involvement and/or internships. Placing the ESL learner at the centre of the curriculum supports the argument that the needs of ESL learners in relation to the foundations of literacy should not be sidestepped in favor of academic purpose.

Figure 1. Curriculum framework.
Implementing a Foundation of Literacy Curriculum Framework

There are a number of implications for this model, and I shall move from the general to the particular in discussing them. The integration of the language and content courses within the whole academic program is obvious for achieving successful student outcomes. The timetabling and sequencing of these courses should build on learners’ prior linguistic and subject knowledge, both in their second language and in the specific lexis of the courses they intend to undertake.

The curriculum framework gives opportunities to offer content which not only build on the foundations of literacy, but also foster and facilitate the crossover into content based programs. For example, courses which encourage and support the development of critical thinking skills - both analytic and lateral – are essential to construct the scaffolding necessary for achieving independent academic success in future years. This could be seen as a bridge to the content specific studies which helps the subject specialists’ and the students’ to see that they share the same goals and expectations in their respective language and content based courses.

It has already been acknowledged that the successful integration of language and content based learning is predicated upon an important pedagogical principle central in all education, namely collaboration and cooperation amongst colleagues. This extends into the areas of the designing, sharing and teaching of materials. Sometimes, in an organizational structure with competitive values on the one hand, and an expectation of faculty cooperation on the other hand, a conflict can arise between what we as educators (whether language or content specialists) assume about what our colleagues ought to be doing, and what they are actually doing. The talking through of cross-curricular issues in a professional development forum will ease tensions and avoid the tendency towards prescriptive and presumptive stands on either the language or subject content of a course. This quite explicit dialogue between language and content based teachers, and the sharing and recommendation of particular types and examples of teaching and learning resources, is a sure sign that an institution is being proactive in building on the foundations of literacy and implementing appropriate teaching and learning strategies across the curriculum.

Building on the Foundations of Literacy: The Production of Knowledge

Students read for a variety of purposes every day, and this simple yet easily overlooked piece of general knowledge enables us to build on their skills as formal readers. For example, they read signs, instructions, maps, text messages, emails, web based sources, daily organizational bulletins, timetables, along with any prescribed course content reading materials.

Yet, at the same time it is interesting to note that innate in the social activity of reading for self interest as cited earlier, are the essential skills for reading for context and purpose. These basic skills can be built on in an academic context thus facilitating an understanding of the selected reading material. However, this is easier to acknowledge in theory than to achieve in practice, because the purpose and context of any academic reading material assume greater importance once we begin to define content. When we read in our mother tongue, we have to some extent acquired an innate knowledge of the cuing systems within a text, whether it is visual, aural or written. We make the tacit relationships between the sounds, visual representations and the presentation of the material. Similarly, for the most part we have been schooled in the syntactical structure of the English language, as well as the semantic understanding that is uniquely shaped
by our culture and societies. Students must navigate their way through a labyrinth of second language structures to be able to gain their full measure of understanding. Furthermore, they generally undertake these tasks within a formal learning environment; as a consequence, the classroom assumes a powerful role as a site for the re-presentation of the curriculum and the production of knowledge and raises an important question. How can language and content based specialists develop a resonance with their ESL learners to continue the essential linguistic development in the foundations of literacy? What I term here as resonance is the ability of a teacher to have empathy and understanding of what it is to be a learner.

Resonance assumes a perceptive intuitiveness by the teacher about the kinds of qualities and attributes that ESL learners bring with them to the classroom to help them be successful. Language teachers as well as content teachers are well able to tap into this and get to know their cohorts as individuals. For example, for 10 minutes at the beginning or end of a lesson, the teacher can sit with the students in a circle and facilitate a group discussion on essential curriculum and learning issues. A wealth of important insights into attitudes and expectations can quickly be revealed to assist both the teacher and student with the process of education within their classroom. Equally importantly, it will reveal elements of the hidden curriculum present in all formal learning situations. Eisner (1989) argues that:

…we are well advised to consider not only the explicit and implicit curricula of institutions, but also what they do not teach. It is my thesis that what institutions do not teach may be as important as what they do teach… (p. 97)

So, it is important we consider these powerful determiners of students’ success or lack thereof when we plan activities like reading, because, they are always there, simmering beneath the surface. Consequently, some of the issues which may emerge from this group activity will include, but not be limited to:

1. language learning needs and issues
2. content learning needs and issues
3. progress in the course
4. social/behavioral issues
5. teacher/student expectations
6. clarification of cultural understandings/misunderstandings
7. worldview of the students beyond the classroom and organization
8. an understanding of previous educational experiences
9. development of a trusted teacher/student relationship

These learning circles can be conducted regularly by content teachers as well as language teachers. They are easy to run and provide a useful change of focus which is often successful judging by how the learners participate, the kinds of information they share and the informal feedback they give on this kind of activity. If conducted carefully, useful cross-curricular insights into the students’ achievement levels and needs can quickly be gained. Also, if the focus in the learning circle remains on fluency over accuracy, it will become apparent whether ESL students are managing to develop skills in the learning processes, which enables them to navigate conceptually from their first language to their newly acquired second language. The learning circle opens up a dialogue with students which highlights particular assumptions and needs in essential skill development within the foundations of literacy. The processes leading to an ESL learner being able to read are complex, seldom linear in their progression and are unavoidably linked to other aspects of the foundations of literacy as well as a person’s psycho-cognitive development. For example, self confidence often emanates from very early childhood experiences and may in turn affects students’ capacity to learn to read well.
So, the kinds of resonances we as teachers, both of language and content based courses, can develop with our students, is through a close observation of how our students manage the reading processes at any given point in their student life. According to Matwiejczyk and Rees (1998):

Some of these observations may include the use of their fingers to follow words across the page or the movement of lips as they read to themselves. There could be a preoccupation with a correct way to read in a classroom setting, or a lack of grammatical awareness when reading aloud. (p. 112)

The point here is to be able to resonate with the subtleties of how students read, and then develop strategies to assist them to become proficient with this essential literacy skill. Traditionally this has been the remit of the language teacher, but as Shaw (2005) and Palmer (2004) suggest, the days when the division of labor while building on the foundations of literacy were so clearly delineated, are over. The content teacher as several of Shaw’s (2005) models illustrates, is a de-facto reading teacher, and the types of texts they choose will define the kinds of learning experiences for their students.

In choosing textual materials, Matwiejczyk and Rees (1998) suggest the following:

**a) Cultural inclusivity**

Texts should include the “activities, experiences and interests of different cultural groups” (Matwiejczyk & Rees, 1998, p. 130). For example in the Middle East, Euro and Anglo centric texts and textual examples could be limited in favor of texts which reflect the culture, lifestyles and values of the host country and avoid ethnocentrism and stereotyping. An interesting and practical example of this is Jehad Al-Omari’s The Arab Way (2003), a Business Studies text which details important differences between business expectations in the West and the Middle East. Such texts highlight shared cultural values, as well as universal needs and avoid tokenism as well as paternalism and negative attitudes. They ensure that a genuine resonance with ESL learners’ needs takes place.

**b) Language accessibility and presentation**

How a text appears will influence its accessibility to ESL learners. Its various boxes, diagrams, subheadings and general layout may need clarification before any intended meaning becomes apparent for the learners. At the same time, it could be that grammatical and syntactical structure may provide easy access, or seriously hinder the ESL learner’s reading comprehension. An existing tension between language courses and content courses is the kinds of English used. For example, the general English used in coursework books like Cutting Edge and Headway differs significantly to the English used in content courses. The use of subject specific vocabulary, as the following example from an IT text illustrates this point:

Aimed at the fiddlers, this choice lets you fine-tune Media Player’s behavior. A series of screens lets you choose the types of music and video Media Player can play, how much of your listening habits should be sent to Microsoft, and what online store you want-if any-for buying songs. Choose this option if you have time to wade through several minutes of boring option screens. (Rathbone, 2007, p. 281)

There will be difficulties for the ESL learner seeking meaning from their electronic dictionary for nouns like fiddler, and verbs like wade. However both the content teacher and the ESL learner
can find support in Cobb's (2003) website, the Compleat Lexical Tutor, which draws on the ideas and word lists of Laufer and Nation (1999). Potential difficulties can be quickly identified by using the Web VP (Web Vocabulary Profiler) which allows users to input a text and compare its vocabulary against word lists that cover the most frequently used words and an academic word list. Where words beyond the students’ level are identified, these can be addressed.

At the same time it should be an expectation that the skill and expertise of the language specialist is shared with the content based teacher. For example the proof reading and/or review of reading materials and assessments of the content courses by language specialists could be facilitated through an institution’s professional development program. It could be further developed through cooperative and collaborative teaching between the language and content based teachers.

Given that the skills for addressing these issues are already held within the ranks of qualified teaching staff within an institution, an in-service program, whereby aspects of language acquisition like text cohesion and genre are taught and shared with content based teachers would involve minimal financial cost to any organization.

**Developing Reading Through Oral Work**

While an ESL learner's ability to speak in a second language is an indispensable skill in its own right, it is also intrinsic to success in reading. Consequently, learning to talk requires equivalency in any course whether it is language or content based learning. Why? The ability to speak, and develop oral skills is essential to understanding the theoretical and conceptual ideas being read in any course of study. Without it, ESL learners are denied the opportunities and experiences to acquire the language essential to the development of ideas. Their conceptual learning in their content based courses will be seriously undermined.

Reading may be further developed through oral based activities in a number of practical, thoughtful and stimulating ways including:

1. the learning circle cited earlier in this paper
2. small vocabulary development reading groups (with guidance from the teacher)
3. group or individual reading presentations
4. student guided reading tutorials (a task where skimming and scanning practice is undertaken in both fun and more formal ways)

All of these activities require thoughtful consideration by the content teacher. ESL learners are very self conscious of their own inadequacies in a new language, and naturally seek positive encouragement and reinforcement. Two strategies which I find work very well for points 2 and 4 above are to allocate quite specific roles in small reading group work. For example, in a group of four students, have one leader who suggests a time limit for each reader and begins the reading aloud, one to be the time keeper for each reader, one to note down new or difficult language, and one to report back to the class on the comprehension and vocabulary issues which will inevitably arise. Secondly, modeling this by the teacher - actually showing students exactly how the exercise is to be carried out - is an exceptional way to promote its success. Moreover, this kind of reading and oral based group work is excellent in a mixed ability class because it allows for differentiation to occur while catering to the needs of all ESL learners.

The implications for this approach, as Shaw (2005) points out are that content teachers take on the mantle of the language teacher. For example, ensuring their students understand the
specific vocabulary in their courses is axiomatic to the students’ success. As well as exploring further professional development opportunities with their language based colleagues, content teachers could have their students develop simple vocabulary charts on an excel spread sheet (Table 2).

Table 2. Example of a vocabulary chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plummeted</td>
<td>fall at high speed</td>
<td>The markets plummeted today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leverage</td>
<td>the power to influence</td>
<td>The CEO used his leverage to support the project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They can add to these at their will. If the same kinds of charts are already being used in language courses, students can learn to merge these and another opportunity for cross-curricular cooperation is opened up, this time between Language teachers and their Business and IT colleagues. It is worth noting that opportunities for this kind of collaborative teaching and learning are already appearing in certain kinds of integrated projects in many learning environments.

**Developing Reading Through Written Work**

Writing, like reading, relies on an understanding of the functions and structures of language. It enjoys a very close relationship with reading; after all is there a better way to model good and poor examples of written language other than reading them? Furthermore, the psycho-cognitive processes of reading and writing suggest that they require productive as well as a receptive skill development, contra to the view that reading and writing are opposites. They both require a similar construction of language to communicate the message.

Ways of providing cross-curricular support include developing integrated project work, team teaching components of a content course, and peer observation of classroom practice. Other strategies include modeling how to read; as mentioned earlier this is an effective way to promote reading skills and also to illustrate the difference between text types.

Another class based activity is Peer Conferencing. It is a process whereby students assist in the improvement of their work through the reading of one another’s written texts. This allows ESL learners to participate as practitioners in the further development of their literacy skills. It encourages the students to focus on meaning and content as well as understanding structure and coherency in their reading and writing and the reading and writing of others. The kind of resistance one might encounter here is that ESL learners do feel insecure about commenting on the language ability of their peers, and consequently it only works effectively when it is modeled and facilitated by the teacher.

Finally, the use of dictogloss is a valuable teaching tool because it integrates the foundations of literacy into any lesson. For example, a Business Management teacher can use this tool to effect meaning and content through the reading of an important passage. Firstly, the teacher reads the passage aloud a few times at normal speed. During the initial reading the ESL learners do not write anything down. Upon subsequent readings they write down as much as possible, in particular key words and phrases. This could also be further adapted by briefly showing the students the text via a data projector, have them read and then reconstruct it.
In pairs they discuss their notes and attempt to come to an agreed understanding of what they heard in terms of content and meaning. The pairs are then allocated to another pair, by the teacher, and the aim of the group is to write up their collective notes into one narrative, in which they capture the main idea and content of the passage. Later, they read the original piece of text, and then they compare and contrast their notes with the original text for further understanding. Their objective is to produce a sequenced, coherent text which contains much the same information as the original. The aim is not so much using their own language, as capturing the clear meaning and intent of the passage. Sharing their findings in comparison with the main text enables the group to:

1. listen for the main ideas in a text
2. read for meaning and understanding
3. work with their unique learning styles (linguistic, auditory, kinesthetic, and visual)
4. cooperate and collaborate with each other
5. use the foundations of literacy as a vehicle to self motivation
6. develop and build on the foundations of literacy

ESL learners develop the foundations of literacy, in particular reading through practice, and this enables them to express themselves with meaning and purpose at their various levels of ability. It prepares and motivates them to participate in the real world of a second language literate culture.

Summary

This paper has summarized a range of positive approaches in supporting content teachers and ESL learners in the reading process. It has offered examples of institutional models, a curriculum framework, and cross-curricular strategies to enhance the teaching and learning experience of ESL students. It has made suggestions and recommendations which provide opportunities to support learners at various stages of their reading development while undertaking their courses. In particular it has addressed the key issue that regardless of our allegiance to a particular discipline and/or faculty, the nature of teaching and learning in institutions where the language of instruction is a second language for all students, necessitates that we are all language teachers. It is hoped that readers of this paper will now be able to develop these strategies through their particular discipline, and in their classrooms, to further assist ESL students, as well as empathize more with the challenges the ESL learners face when engaging in reading in a language other than their mother tongue.

References


