Secondary Immersion Teaching and Learning: What Role do Classroom Materials Play?

by Corinne Mathieu

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As dual language and immersion (DLI) programs grow into the secondary years, teachers face new challenges teaching increasingly abstract and complex content through a second language (L2). Recent research has shown that immersion students' L2 proficiency can plateau in the intermediate range by 8th grade (Fortune & Tedick, 2015). This is problematic in part because abstract academic content uses and requires advanced academic language. In conversation with these findings, this brief reports on one piece of a larger study that examined the complex and interlocking roles that secondary materials played in the ecology (van Lier, 2004) of one seventh-grade Social Studies Spanish immersion classroom. Among the many findings, the relationships among the classroom materials, the instructional paradigm, academic thinking skills, and student discourse hold particular import to practicing teachers.

Why focus on materials?

When DLI educators talk about their experiences teaching content through a L2, the lack of appropriate classroom materials frequently surfaces as an ever-present challenge. This is particularly true for the secondary context where cognitively-appropriate authentic textbooks, those originally published for Spanish first language (L1) students, are often too linguistically difficult for immersion students (Hernández, 2015). Due to the growing number of Spanish immersion programs in the United States, publishing companies have begun to produce translations of textbooks written in English, but even so, DLI educators spend considerable time and energy translating or modifying materials for students. Given the time and human resources invested in immersion materials, it is important to understand the roles those materials play in the classroom.

To understand how materials impacted the studied class, I observed and audio-recorded the teaching of one seventh-grade unit that encompassed a survey of African geography, history and culture. I also collected and analyzed the materials used. I define classroom materials as any artifact that provides direct input while prompting the learning of content subject matter and/or the learning and use of language. In this class, prominent materials included the textbook, reading comprehension packets that contained teacher-made and published worksheets, teacher-made PowerPoint presentations, teacher-made and published handouts prompting activities not related to the textbook, short informational videos, and the teacher-made study guide, quizzes, and final exam. I also interviewed the teacher before and after the classroom observations to more meaningfully interpret what I was noticing in the classroom and formulate my emerging conclusions.

Materials and the instructional paradigm

In this classroom, the translated social studies textbook served as the *de facto* curriculum. Although the teacher did not explicitly mention the textbook when describing the curriculum, the ways he used it in relation to other materials positioned it as the curriculum in reality. The textbook was approached in a linear fashion, with students completing reading comprehension packets while working through three sequential chapters over the course of the unit.

The final exam held considerable weight, both academically and psychologically, in this class. When presented with any new materials, the students quickly asked if its information would be on the exam. The teacher at times reinforced a dichotomy between "important" (i.e., on the exam) and "supplementary" materials by responding to students' queries with *"Ésta es una actividad para usar el cerebro"* [This is an activity to use your brain] for materials which would **not** translate to the exam. Although the teacher used the term "activity" in this phrase, the statement functioned as a hierarchical positioning of the different materials. This phrase was used in conjunction with two of the three handouts that were not related to the textbook, essentially relegating them as subordinate to those that were. Moreover, the phrase implied that non-textbook-based materials were cognitively demanding, but unimportant, whereas those associated with the textbook, and therefore the exam, were important but cognitively undemanding.

Along with the dichotomous positioning of "important" and supplementary materials, the nature of the "important" materials created an "answer-focused education paradigm" (Zwiers et al., 2014, p. 11). These materials included numerous display comprehension questions designed for students to report short, factual answers. Teacher-written examples from a narrative about an Egyptian teenager included *"¿De dónde es la familia de Shaimaa?"* [Where is Shaimaa's family from?] and *"¿Cómo es la vida en el vecindario?"* [What is life in the neighborhood like?]. The materials also invited activities that required low-level thinking skills, such as matching, fill-in-the-blank CLOZE activities, and sorting. By inviting only low-level thinking skills, these materials communicated to the students that their task was to find and present only short, correct responses, limiting the opportunities for them to engage in higher levels of academic thinking and more extended language production.

Relationship between the instructional paradigm and student language functions

Chamot & O'Malley (1994) distinguish between communicative language functions, those that are used for social purposes, and academic language functions, which are used in the process of engaging with academic content. Examples of communicative functions include expressing emotions, requesting information, and clarifying guidelines, and examples of academic functions include justifying and persuading, solving problems, and inquiring about the content. Performing academic language functions, particularly at the secondary level, generally requires a higher level of language proficiency. The connection between proficiency and functions is illustrated in assessment tools such as the WIDA Spanish Language Development Standards in which linguistic functions increase in complexity according to the level of linguistic development (WIDA, 2013).

When working with the textbook and associated activities, student language production relied on a stunted range of communicative language functions. The language functions used by students seemed to correlate closely with the thinking skills invited by the materials. For example, one page in the Chapter 15 reading comprehension packet asked students to complete

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sentences using information in the text. The second item on this page read, *"Los coptos, que pertenecen a un grupo minoritario de Egipto, son la _____ más grande en el Oriente Medio, no obstante, algunas veces son tratados como _____."* [The Copts, who make up a minority group in Egypt, are the largest _____ in the Middle East, nevertheless, they are sometimes treated like _____.]. The instructions for this task cued low-level thinking skills like identifying information and limited, one-word responses. This type of instruction seemed to signal to the students that their job was to search the text for the correct answer, leading to student use of communicative language functions such as requesting the location of information (*¿Dónde están los coptos?* [Where are the Copts?]), asking for verification (*¿Eso es correcto?* [Is this right?]), or expressing frustration when unable to find the exact text (*¡No dice aquí! Son el grupo más grande, no sé. No dice.* [It doesn't say here! They are the largest group, I don't know. It doesn't say.].

While the type of student discourse shown above was predominant throughout the unit, some teacher-developed materials that did not directly incorporate the textbook did elicit a wider range of academic discourse functions. These materials tended to cue higher-level thinking skills, which, along with their supplementary status, invited opportunities for more varied and complex student discourse. For example, the teacher used the PowerPoint to pose the Essential Question, *"¿Quién debe beneficiarse de los recursos de un país?"* [Who should benefit from a country's resources?]. An associated handout material included the instructions *"Para desarrollar unos argumentos, debes usar tu opinión combinada con información válida del libro."* [To develop your arguments, you should use your opinion combined with valid information from the book.] Although these instructions mentioned the textbook, the way the teacher introduced and conducted the activity did not include the textbook itself. Moreover, these instructions invited higher-level thinking skills, such as developing arguments, justifying, and synthesizing information. In response, student discourse in this activity included qualitatively more academic language functions including presenting an argument and conjecturing in a hypothetical situation. As an example, one student responded, *"Pienso que um como todos deben tener como un mínimo de recursos, pero uh um otros personas deben, si tiene como un buen trabajo, deben tener más recursos porque van a ganarlo que…"* [I think that um like everyone should have a minimum of resources, but uh um some people should, if (he) has like a good job, they should have more resources because they are going to earn it that…].

Implications for classroom practice

As demonstrated previously, the classroom materials corresponded to specific thinking skills, which then shaped a certain type of classroom discourse. The materials that were related to the social studies textbook - and therefore positioned as "important" - overwhelmingly invited lower-level thinking skills, which consequently related to basic, communicative language functions. In contrast, the few materials that were positioned as supplementary tended to cue higher-level thinking skills and more instances of academic language functions.

With this in mind, the way DLI teachers analyze and employ their classroom materials can have important impacts on how students engage with the content and the language students produce. Below are several suggestions for ways teachers can leverage materials to positively impact their instructional paradigm and student learning.

First and foremost, before planning lessons around materials, teachers might find conducting a simple analysis of the thinking skills inherently elicited by the materials to be beneficial. This analysis would involve first examining any written instructions since the verbs of the instructions (describe, match, explain, etc.)

often indicate the level of the thinking skills cued by the material. The teacher might also analyze the text of the material to assess whether its linguistic and cognitive complexity correlates to students' abilities. If not, it may be more likely that students will not be able to engage in higher-level thinking skills, regardless of whether they are invited by the material. Finally, for materials that invite written production, the teacher might look at the design of the material, analyzing, for example, whether the layout, such as amount of space provided, is conducive to the level of thinking skills indicated by the directions.

Second, as shown in this study, the type of questions posed by the materials can strongly impact student discourse. In order to target higher-order thinking skills and, therefore, academic language functions, materials need to pose open questions (those that require sustained answers) with more frequency. Research on teacher's use of oral questions in other content-based language teaching contexts has shown that teachers tend to over-rely on display questions, which emphasize facts over explanations or analysis (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Kong, 2009); however, those teachers who succeeded in using dialogic discursive methods, including open, prompting questions, were able to foster higher levels of cognitive engagement and more language production in their students (Kong & Hoare, 2011). I argue that the same is true of the written questions posed through the materials themselves.

Finally, most of the materials given to students at the secondary level are designed to either present new content (a textbook or reading) or to support their understanding of the content. The design of these latter materials will correspond to the thinking skills that students use when engaging with the content, and therefore have important consequences for the instructional paradigm and student discourse. For example, when using linguistically complex academic texts, beginning with materials such as a skeleton text or semantic web (Gibbons, 2002) that invite higher-level pre-reading strategies like predicting and justifying, will prepare students to engage with the text beyond basic comprehension. Furthermore, the types of materials that are employed in conjunction with reading can greatly affect both engagement and discourse around the text. Based on this study, I encourage teachers to design materials that correlate to a deeper level of reading comprehension beyond basic understanding. These might include graphic organizers, margin questions, or inference-based true/false statements (Gibbons, 2002). These types of materials will support higher levels of cognitive engagement, which can prime students for more academic language production and may ultimately serve to push their proficiency beyond the intermediate-level plateau.

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