Integrating Language and Content in Native Language Teaching

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0. Introduction

Since there are many different kinds of syllabi for second language teaching (cf. Breen 1987), teachers and programme designers will want to consider the alternatives so that they can chose those ideas and formats which seem most productive for their requirements. A syllabus that is appropriate for teaching Native languages as second languages should be able to include the unique characteristics both of these languages and of the culture in which the languages are embedded. Thus, a Native language teaching syllabus will need to: 1) organize the presentation of linguistic elements that are quite different from many Indo-European structures, 2) include culturally relevant content, and 3) present the content in a manner which is consistent with the cultural organization of knowledge. In this paper I will outline an approach to Native second language teaching which appears to be useful for meeting these challenges.

To a certain extent, second language syllabi have often focused on either form or function. Various theories of second language learning, including behaviorist, cognitive and parameter-setting approaches, suggest that learners will benefit from some form of consciousness-raising, perhaps including some metalinguistic knowledge (cf. Sharwood-Smith 1981). Adopting this view of language learning, many language courses are organized according to grammatical criteria and focus on the formal properties of language. An example of this formal approach to the teaching of Native languages can be seen in the following directive for Cree language practice: “Discuss

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something or things belonging to a 3rd person, and practise Inanimate Intransitive describing verbs in the obviative taking care to mark singular versus plural” (Ellis 1983:414). In this example, metalinguistic terms are used to focus on the structural properties of Cree.

In contrast to this formal emphasis, some second language educators have emphasized function rather than form. They suggest that language learning may be especially effective when it is incidental to the task of communicating (e.g., Tucker and D’Angeljan 1975:162). Krashen (1982) suggests that language acquisition (as opposed to conscious, monitored language learning) is not facilitated by formal grammar teaching, but rather that acquisition proceeds only from comprehension and a focus on meaning. This view of language learning has been adopted in the approach to teaching Cree outlined in Klokeid and Ratt (1989). Since theories of language pedagogy may be based on these two different theories of language learning, there has been much controversy and confusion in language teaching and research (e.g., VanPatten 1988).

Recent researchers have suggested that these two foci, form and function, are not opposites, but rather that they are compatible. Thus, recent second language research has considered the integration of language and content (e.g., Brinton et al 1989; Crandall 1987; Mohan 1986; Snow et al 1989). These researchers have suggested many reasons for the systematic integration of language and content. First, the teaching of some formal aspects of language allows for the possibility that second language learners will benefit from some form of consciousness-raising. Second, the use of meaningful content is valuable since acquisition may result from comprehension and communication. Third, the use of authentic content provides motivation for the learner. Fourth, combining content with language builds on the learners’ previous knowledge. Fifth, the use of authentic content prepares the learner for actual use of language. Sixth, and perhaps most important for Native language teaching, it is a goal of Native language classes to also teach culture (e.g., Leavitt 1983, 1987; Preston 1979, 1982). Leavitt (1983:27) suggests that:

[N]ative language curriculum must be designed to lead students directly to a way of sharing native values and standards in these languages. Teachers must be able to explore Micmac and Malecite-Passamaquoddy values and points-of-view at the same time that they are teaching basic vocabulary, morphology, sentence patterns, and conversational skills.

In addition, as Valdes (1986:121) has noted, “it is virtually impossible to teach a language without teaching cultural content” (cf. Mohan 1986). Since we cannot avoid teaching some form of culture with language and we wish to teach the native culture as well, combining the two seems well justified. These six reasons clearly support a syllabus that integrates language and
Several recent approaches to Native language teaching have sought to integrate language and content. One alternative to grammar based approaches to teaching Cree is the text based approach suggested in Ahenakew (1987a:15). She suggests that in addition to providing examples of language structures (grammar and discourse), “the content of such texts offers valuable insights into Cree life, traditional and contemporary”. Other approaches which emphasize both language and some aspect of content include the Cree Way materials developed by John Murdoch (Preston 1979) and storytelling as language curriculum (Leavitt 1983). Since Native educators have already acknowledged and implemented integrated approaches, this paper outlines a framework which could be used to develop specific classroom materials.

1. Language and Content

Mohan (1986) seeks to provide a systematic framework which allows teachers to organize materials that relate language and content. Thus, “Knowledge Structures” (KSs) act as a bridge between language and content. Mohan proposes that a typical situation includes (but is not limited to) a certain group of six knowledge structures (KS) which can also be found in texts. Thus, these are categories of knowledge (cognitive categories) which are realized in discourse. The six KSs can be divided into the two groups in (1):

(1)  Action    Situation    Background Information
     Description Classification
     Sequence    Principles
     Choice      Evaluation

Thus, three of the KSs are practical or action oriented: description, sequence and choice. The other three, classification, principles and evaluation, correspond to each of the first KSs, and relate to abstract or theoretical background information.

As a linguistic element or unit of analysis, KSs are larger than the level of the sentence. The hierarchy of discourse in (2) indicates the nature of KSs as text structures:
A Hierarchy of Discourse

Knowledge Framework
Knowledge Structure
Discourse Genre
Exchange (or pair of Adjacent Utterances)
Functional Utterance
Sentence
Clause
Word
Morpheme
Phoneme
Phone

This simplified hierarchy only includes a few units of linguistic analysis above the level of sentence. For example, it omits the Algonquian discourse structures which result from alternations in obviation or order (e.g., Russell 1990; Cyr 1990).

Many items of content can be considered in terms of the KSs. Examples can be found in the texts in Ahenakew (1987b): a description of how you feel at birth (if you have a very good memory), the sequence of breaking in a horse, a classification of good and bad food and drink, a principle of cause and effect: why people did not die young in the old days, and an evaluation of the best dancer.

Teachers may use the KSs in various ways. For example, a teacher could chose to organize a class around sequence. The teacher could then find an example of a sequence in an authentic text, e.g., Piyesiis breaking in a horse (Ahenakew 1987b:87). The teacher could then work through that text with the students, using the potentially familiar content as a foundation upon which to build. During the class, the teacher can introduce language items which can be used to express sequence. The actual language instruction could take many forms (e.g., explicit vs. implicit presentation), depending upon the teacher's evaluation of the situation and the students. While working with culturally appropriate content, the goals will be to enable the students to understand and produce Cree utterances and texts which express sequences, and to understand the nature of sequential concepts in Cree. In sum, these six KSs can act as a link between language and content for the design of second language classroom materials.

2. Language Elements that Correspond to the Knowledge Structures

Within this approach, language elements would not be selected according to structural linguistic criteria such as "Today we will learn verbal morphology". Instead, elements are chosen because they allow speakers to express the various structures of content knowledge. Thus, a functional criteria would be used: language items are chosen if they allow learners to express
structures of knowledge; items which are rarely used in these structures may be omitted. Thus, items of grammar which are included in traditional grammar-based approaches may be omitted, and items which are not normally included in syllabi may be included. For teaching Algonquian languages, this might mean that various useful particles might be included before many of the details of inflectional morphology. Since the KSs are large categories which could be expressed by many different linguistic elements (including grammar, discourse and vocabulary), the order in which those elements are presented could be in accord with psycholinguistically motivated notions such as developmental sequences and markedness. Several examples of linguistic elements which correspond to certain KSs are outlined below.

A wide range of Algonquian linguistic elements correspond to description. A common structure used for describing properties in English is be + Adjective. Since most Algonquian languages do not have adjectives, structures such as intransitive verbs are used for description. Examples of AI verbs, taken from Ahenakew (1987b) are given in (3)–(5) below:

(3) kawaci- ‘be cold’
(4) ooheehkatee- ‘be hungry’
(5) waapiskisi- ‘be white’

Building a vocabulary of intransitive describing verbs and the appropriate inflectional affixes for these verbs could be discussed when lessons centre on description. Another language element that can be used for describing properties is the preverb. Several examples of these preverbs are given in (6) below:

(6) ookik nisto-misi-maci-napiw-ak
these three-big-evil-man-plural
‘These three big evil men.’

Building a vocabulary of preverbs and their appropriate prefixed position could be discussed when lessons centre on description.

For describing actions and situations rather than properties, an important topic for a language class could be direction, i.e., the differentiation of actors and goals through the use of a suffixed direction marker. The difference caused by the changes in the marker is illustrated below:

(7) niwaapamaaw atim ‘I see the dog.’
(8) niwaapamik atim ‘The dog sees me.’

In sum, this KS, description, appears to be useful for organizing a variety of structurally different but functionally similar language elements.
Various Algonquian linguistic elements can be used to express sequence, including the particles listed in (9)–(13) (taken from Ahenakew 1987b and Rhodes 1979):

(9) **piyis**  
finally, at last

(10) **mayaw**  
as soon as

(11) **ngoding**  
episodic divider

(12) **miin’waa**  
marker of stages

(13) **mii**  
section divider

Other particles which express temporal relations are those noted by Kilroe (1991) in which locative affixes and particles are extended to temporal uses. Sequence, as temporal immediacy, can also be expressed through the use of independent and conjunct forms in Ojibwa (Rhodes 1979:111). In sum, a number of linguistic elements of Algonquian languages correspond to the KSs.

3. **Knowledge Structures in Cree**

In addition to providing an organizing framework for content materials and language items, the KSs also provide a useful framework organizing many aspects of the structure of knowledge in Cree. Preston (1979:99) notes that “the great potential for Cree Way [language teaching materials –JDM] to contribute to the effective continuation of Cree language and culture lies in the development of curriculum materials that are based upon the Cree structure of knowledge”. Studies such as that of Preston (1982) provide insight into the organization of Cree knowledge. These results appear to be extremely compatible with the framework of six KSs, i.e., KSs can be used to categorize many aspects of the structure of Cree knowledge. For example, Preston (1982:299) discusses the description of the perceived world: there is an emphasis on action as primary, and knowledge is defined directly rather than through contemplation and the derivation of general and abstract principles.

Several structures of Cree knowledge correspond to the KS of classification. For example, Preston (1982:304–305) discusses the classification of the **witiko**, the legendary cannibal monster: “[T]he term **witiko** has been applied to a person-category (“species” category), but probably is better analyzed as depicting a set of qualities that may be recognized as characteristic of more than one category of persons. Put simply, **witiko** is not a person, but a condition that may affect persons of many kinds”. Another example of classification is defining, which Preston (1982:299) suggests is done directly rather than through abstract contemplation.
Preston (1982:305) also provides information about structures of knowledge which correspond to principles: "Explanation is usually implicit: you have to find your own understanding of events, in a general sense of learning, by example but not by instruction. Ask an unstructured question and you will get a narrative, not an explicit statement of principle".

Evaluation is a fourth KS which has Cree specific structures. Preston (1982:299) refers to "the evaluative side of Cree life" and suggests that "much if not all of Cree knowledge has to do with the practise of right conduct". He then describes some of the ways in which events are evaluated. Overall, it appears that the six KSs may provide a useful framework for organizing the Cree structure of knowledge.

4. Evaluation and Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined a particular analytic (rather than experiential) approach for organizing Native classroom materials that deal with both language and content. The system of six knowledge structures may be used to link culturally appropriate and authentic content, cultural structures of knowledge, and communicatively useful language elements. While it is based on integrated theories of language and language learning, the approach could be empirically evaluated in a number of ways. First, its value for learning content and the organization of knowledge could be considered. The use of text structures such as these to facilitate the learning of second language content material has been demonstrated in Carrell (1985). Alternatively, the value of this approach for learning specific language items could also be studied. Perhaps the most relevant instructional experiment is Harley (1988) which found only short term improvement in the use of several areas of French verbal morphology after students were given opportunities to express these functions in communicative, interesting and motivating tasks. While these studies are suggestive, the current literature does not yet provide conclusive empirical evidence regarding the value of this or almost any other approach to second language teaching.

At present, this approach, like other linguistically or pedagogically relevant distinctions, can be evaluated by individual teachers in terms of its utility for the particular language, students, and situation. Cree teachers can consider whether these categories are useful for organizing Algonquian language items and content materials. Cree teachers must also determine if the KSs are simply categories which are imposed on their views and their organization of knowledge, or if they are genuinely valuable and intuitively appropriate.

Certainly there will be limitations on the use of the KSs. They may be neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive: some areas of content may involve several KSs together; language elements will also not correspond
exclusively to one KS. In addition, a KS may refer to a large text or just one smaller unit within a text. However, the purpose of the KSs, as stated here, is not to provide unique a correspondence between elements of content, elements of language and KSs, but to provide a framework that is pedagogically useful in many instances.

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