Discovering New Dimensions in an Old Task: Higher-Ed Bilingual Professors Learn to Use Lesson Planning for Student's Educational Success

Enith Viviana Morales Henao
Angélica Paola Peña Piragua

Abstract

Professors at the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana* (ÚNICA) have aimed to deliver lessons for second language learners which integrate content and language, resulting in an "integrated lesson" design. The Center for Applied Linguistics (Washington, DC) recommends the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) as a way of helping teachers plan and deliver integrated lessons. The effectiveness of this protocol has been corroborated on the K-12 level, and now, through action research, we are developing its applicability on the higher education level at ÚNICA. The purpose of this sub-study was to describe professors' experiences as they were trained in the design and delivery

of lessons based on SIOP. After analyzing data, it was found that professors at ÚNICA had some weaknesses such as: a misunderstanding of content and language objectives, a difficulty in selecting verbs when stating objectives and higher order questions, among others. On the other hand, professors did not have any problem stating accurate content concepts and planning meaningful activities. All these are old tasks that teachers are familiar with; however, our research has revealed new dimensions which, if understood rightly, will provide valuable insights for instructors so that their lessons may not ever become monotonous or dry.

Key Words: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), Lesson Preparation, Integrated Lesson, Content Objectives, Language Objectives

Protocolo de Observación de la Instrucción Protegida (SIOP), Preparación de Clase, Preparación de Clase Integral, Objetivos de Contenido, Objetivos de Lenguaje

Introduction

Content-language integration is one of the most critical issues for students' cognitive and academic success in second language acquisition (Collier, 1995). Professors at the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana* (ÚNICA) have aimed to deliver lessons in English for second language learners which do just this: they integrate content and language, resulting in an "integrated lesson" design. Regarding the best practices for schools with these same objectives, the Center for Applied Linguistics (Washington, DC) recommends the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) as a way of helping teachers plan and deliver integrated lessons to second language learners.

The SIOP model provides a complete structure for lesson planning, the first component of the model. This scheme helps teachers plan for content objectives as well as for the language goals required to attain them. Teachers who teach using the SIOP model prompt students to begin connecting prior and new knowledge as well as prior/new experiences. Furthermore, teachers are able to make content more comprehensible for their students so that these students may reach the objectives proposed for each class. Rummelhart (in Echevarria, Short, & Vogt, 2004).

The researchers have carefully observed professors at ÚNICA while they have, as vanguards in the field, attempted to integrate the SIOP model on a higher education level. Theirs is a very challenging task because designing lessons that include both language and content objectives is often confusing. Moreover, planning carefully to make learning meaningful through activities that go beyond theories is a great challenge.

Throughout this overview of SIOP-style lesson preparation, the first of eight sub-studies on the SIOP model applicability at ÚNICA, readers will receive first, a general view about current professors' teaching. Then, they will discover the identified problems regarding lesson preparation and delivery. Finally, they will be advised on some relevant suggestions about how teachers can make learning meaningful while planning to deliver effective lessons.

Context

Professors at ÚNICA teach English as well as content to bilingual education undergraduate students. There are many highly skilled professors, but planning and delivering lessons with both content and language objectives is something new for them. Professors need to understand how to deliver lessons in a comprehensible way while using an integrated curriculum which includes language and content objectives.

At ÚNICA students take classes with professors who have diverse pedagogical styles. On the one hand, some of the professors guide students to achieve language and content objectives while motivating learners to monitor their own processes and progress. These mentors take into account students' background and level of language proficiency. We see them as being focused on "mastering learning" rather than "mastering teaching." In other words, they teach to help students perform successfully, instead of training themselves to be better instructors. On the other hand, we have found that there are other professors that because of their didactics focus more on results than on students' learning processes. This first approach, one which is useful in all educational venues, is what we consider to be healthier for learners in general, not just for SLLs, who are of course, the focus of our research.

Sometimes professors are not open to students' suggestions regarding the educational process; maybe it is difficult for them to accept neophyte teachers' opinions due to a supposed lack of experience. It would be good for them to know that through our experience as both students

and teachers we have become aware of unseen aspects of the educational process that would be helpful for more experienced professors. One such aspect is how valuable it is to work with students as a team while planning, instructing, building knowledge, giving feedback and so on.

When teachers focus their attention on "mastering learning," students improve their learning process. Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock (in Pollock, 2001). Unfortunately, teachers sometimes forget about the most critical player of the teaching-learning process, the student. Marzano, et al., (in Pollock, 2001). According to Popham (2006, p. 82) "students are active participants in learning processes when teachers empower them to monitor their own process toward clearly understood curricular aims." In order to make the point more clear, we might take the poetic license to add the word "only" to Popham's quote to read "students are active participants in learning processes *only* when teachers empower them…" Since clear content and language objectives guide teaching and learning, students should be informed of both in order to achieve the stated goals and expectations (Echevarria, Short, & Vong, 2004), but do professors realize that they must do so to complete the educational experience?

Sometimes students do not comprehend content concepts when their second language stage is not sufficiently developed to understand certain theories. There are a small number of professors that seem to forget students' varying English levels. We observed that they hadn't planned activities for students with lower levels and that they hadn't given specific instruction that otherwise would have allowed learners to attain language and content objectives. Unfortunately, probably due to habits obtained through years of traditional educational routines, some professors hadn't used the most meaningful activities to lead students in the four basic linguistic skills while teaching content. Sadly, in some classes which we witnessed, there was no contextualization of the topic or previous knowledge review for students to make prior and new topic connections, both essential for students to have a better understanding of the lesson given.

An example is when students take a class on research with qualitative or quantitative methods, many of them are not able to perform well in those specific topics due to certain obstacles: a lack of vocabulary, skills which are not sufficiently developed to understand robust content and also, professors who do not provide authentic and meaningful scenarios for them. The same occurs with other subjects such as *Communication Theory, Intercultural Communication, History* and *Pedagogy*. It's sad to

say, but numerous students have failed these content courses due to an inability to overcome the formerly mentioned barriers.

Students who do not fully understand content concepts are not able to perform successfully due to the content gaps left open during their advancement in the learning process. Some students are left behind not only because of their level of English, but, in some cases, primarily because they are missing such content concepts. As a result, these students are not sufficiently motivated and their academic performance is found to be below expectation.

The SIOP model is a way of helping teachers plan and deliver lessons to second language learners, one which includes both content and language objectives. The effectiveness of this protocol has already been corroborated on the K-12 level, and now, through action research, we are developing its applicability on the higher education level at ÚNICA. We desire our professors to become familiar with the SIOP and hope that they might feel comfortable when planning lessons with it since it has already been seen to be a useful tool for those working in primary and secondary school bilingual education.

Area of Focus Statement
The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of five volunteer ÚNICA professors as they were trained in the design and delivery of lessons based on SIOP.

Defining the Variables
For the purpose of this study we took into account the following variables:
1. The process by which knowledge was gained by professors while planning and developing lessons plans.
2. Elements of the lesson preparation professors found difficult.
3. Elements of the lesson preparation professors felt comfortable with.

Research Question
What exactly were professors' experiences when planning and delivering classes applying the lesson preparation component of the SIOP model?

Sub-questions:
1. What did professors learn from their lesson preparation and delivery?
2. What were the specific elements of lesson preparation professors found difficult?
3. What were the specific elements of lesson preparation professors felt comfortable with?

Data Collection

The following paragraphs will show: what the intervention was, who participated in the action research group, the agreements which were made, what the agenda from February to May 2008 was, what resources were needed and what data sources were used in order to answer the research questions.

1. Intervention

   To start with, we collected professors' self reflection about planning their lessons. Then, we gathered professors' lesson plans, meeting notes, class observation notes, SIOP checklist and video tapes. After that, we collected professors' second reflection about their experience when delivering their lessons. Finally, we analyzed the original hard-copy documents in order to draw conclusions.

2. Constitution of the Action Research Group

   During the development of this study, student researchers worked with professors. Professors were videotaped during lesson delivery while the student researchers were in charge of both taking notes and filling out the checklist format. Finally, those same researchers analyzed data and stated conclusions.

3. Agreements Made

   In order to videotape the classes and to get the current data, first we needed the students' written permission to interrupt their class protocol. For us to get this permission, collaborating professors informed their students about the project and the purpose of videotaping. Once students accepted, they had to sign a special form which had been designed to allow researchers open access to the classroom experience.

4. Timeline

   For the purpose of this study we established four phases. During the month of February, which was the first phase, we identified the area of focus, reviewed the related literature and developed the

research questions. In the second phase, the month of March, we developed the action plan and the triangulation matrix. Also, we collected lesson plans, analyzed them, and presented some findings. All through the third phase, in the month of April, we collected more data such as professors' self-reflections before and after delivering their lessons, observation notes of different professors' classes, the SIOP checklists, and videotapes. After collecting the original documents, we analyzed them, presented our findings and gave suggestions. Finally, during May, the month which culminated the project, we drew our final conclusions.

5. **Human Resources**
   In order to carry out this research, we needed to commit two student researchers to each class for taking field notes. These were the ones who filled out the SIOP checklist. Also, we asked a cameraman to videotape classes.

6. **Data Sources**
   During the whole research process we used *five different qualitative data collection techniques* in order to find out about professors' experiences while planning and delivering their classes using the SIOP model. Our data collection tools for this action research were the following:

   i.   *Professors' Lesson Plan Templates*- Professors designed their lessons for videotaped classes.

   ii. *Meeting Notes and Tapes*- After we presented a workshop to them about lesson preparation, professors made some comments about each element of this component. We taped their comments and took notes, something which served to support previous findings regarding professors' reflections.

   iii. *Professors' Self-Reflections* (before and after delivering class)- Professors were asked to reflect on their experiences had while planning and delivering their lesson and to write them down on a normal sheet of paper. With our basis in this original writing we were able to find three more dimensions in the research: Firstly, we identified what their experiences were when applying the lesson preparation component of the SIOP model. Secondly, we better perceived what professors learned from their lesson preparation, that is, we could see what specific elements of lesson preparation they found difficult. Finally, we

57

made note of some of the elements of lesson preparation professors seemed to feel comfortable with.

iv. *Observation Notes*- The student researchers were asked to take field notes while professors were delivering their classes.

v. *Checklists*- Student researchers filled out SIOP checklists while professors were delivering their class. After that, we were organized in student-teacher pairs (that is, the observed professor with one student researcher) to watch the video and to fill out another checklist. The writing section was done individually to obtain validity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The following conclusions of lesson preparation, the first component of the SIOP model, were based on the varied qualitative data collection tools we mentioned above. Bearing in mind the research questions, we divided the analysis into two parts. The first part includes the particular elements of lesson preparation professors found difficult, and the second part shows the specific aspects of lesson preparation professors felt comfortable with. Each part involves the analysis of all the original hard-copies divided into three parts: first, the analysis of the professors' lesson planning template and meeting discussions; second, the analysis of each professors' reflections before and after delivering their lessons; and third, an analysis of the video checklists.

Elements of lesson preparation teachers found difficult:

A. Analysis of Professors' Lesson Planning Template and Meeting Discussions

1. Regarding the original written documents, professors had some confusion when defining *content and language objectives*. Even in the workshop we presented about lesson preparation, it seemed to be difficult for most of the professors to decide whether the objectives shown were either content or language goals. The two following examples were taken from their own lesson template writings which were to be discussed in the workshop. These same may be used to demonstrate how confusing it was sometimes for the professors to clearly state both content and language objectives. Each of these examples demonstrates the lack of clarity as to what the difference between language and content objectives are.

Two professors wrote:

❖ *Explicar las razones por las cuales las culturas indígenas han perdido sus culturas o elementos culturales.*

❖ *Students are able to brainstorm ideas about the social factors that affect the way human beings say things.*

2. Another important issue when analyzing data was that sometimes it was hard for professors to state *measurable objectives.* The following were some of the most common verbs professors used when stating objectives: *relate, reflect, brainstorm, answer, summarize, discuss, build, write, recognize, outline, present, use, explicar, and identificar.*

We selected the following example of one professor's objectives to illustrate how important it is to utilize a measurable verb, one which makes it clear to the students what exactly they are expected to accomplish:

❖ *Analyze chapter concepts with personal experiences and their relation to the sub-component studies.* (It is known, of course, that the word "analyze" is not a measurable verb, therefore this objective is not helpful for evaluating students).

After reviewing the meaning of these verbs with the volunteer professors as a team, we concluded together that the use of verbs must always allow the possibility of measuring students' learning processes.

3. According to the collected data *higher order questions* was another item professors needed to work on. Examples like the following, taken from the volunteers lesson plans, are evidence of this need:

❖ *How can you get your learners to a higher stage?*

❖ *Could you define puberty, adolescent growth spurt, formal operations and ecological approach?*

❖ *Who followed the SIOP standards better and why?*

Professors focused more on knowledge, comprehension, and application instead of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation which are considered *higher level thinking skills.* In order to strengthen this debility, we designed a workshop that gave the opportunity for all of the professors to agree on the principle that higher order questions

do in fact help students to develop thinking, to encourage them to see things from different perspectives, to have a deeper understanding as well as to develop learning strategies. Also, during this activity professors pointed out that higher order questions may and should be used any time during class, when they become more relevant and useful. Furthermore, in that session of the workshop professors suggested that higher order questions can be more useful if students state them themselves, that is, expressing them in their own words.

4. Lesson planning templates showed that the use of *supplementary materials* was something professors have to consider since many of them just use materials such as class readings or text books. During the workshop, some of the professors' comments allowed us to remark upon this issue. We were able to help them to see that they were still assuming that the use of supplementary materials is necessary only when teaching children. At the end of the workshop, they realized that the use of supplementary materials is not just a matter of age. They could see that multiple intelligences and learning styles are variables teachers have to deal with also when instructing in a higher educational context. Furthermore, they came to understand that supplementary materials are tools to help teachers reach objectives and make the teaching-learning process more comprehensible for their students.

B. Analysis of Professors' Reflections Before and After Delivering their Lessons:

The findings of professors' reflections *before* delivering their class supported some of the conclusions we drew when analyzing lesson planning templates.

1. There were three aspects found related to content and language objectives. First, it was difficult for most of the professors to differentiate between content objectives and language objectives. Second, few professors wrote that the establishment of content objectives was not difficult because their answer was more in reference to what they wanted students to accomplish according to the syllabus done in advance. Finally, regarding language objectives, some of the professors considered that language goals are necessary simply when students make mistakes in the second language. They did not consider language objectives as a way to achieve content objectives.

2. It was difficult for professors to think about measurable verbs to state their objectives because professors were not sure whether a verb was measurable or not.

The findings of professors' reflections *after* delivering a class were as follows:

✦ Most of the professors wrote that it was difficult to manage time because there was more time needed for students to spend in each of the videotaped lesson activities than the professors had already planned.

C. Analysis of Videos Checklist

The findings of the video checklists were the following:

1. Regarding *content and language objectives* we found that some professors wrote the objectives, but did not read them aloud. This was one of the comments observers made: "content and language objectives were clearly defined in written form, but the teacher misses the oral part." According to Echevarria and Vogt (2004, p. 22), "Content and language objectives should be stated clearly and simply, and students should be informed of them, both orally and in writing."

2. Some checklists evidenced the *lack of supplementary materials* professors bring to class. Three of nine checklists analyzed show the following supplementary materials: video clips, maps, cardboard, markers, and posters. Data revealed that some observers as well as few professors confused materials, textbooks and readings, with supplementary materials, hands-on manipulatives, realia, pictures, visuals and so on. The use of different supplementary materials supports students' learning styles, and helps them make easier connections among their previous knowledge and new learning experiences (Echevarria, Short & Voght, 2004).

3. The majority of the checklists showed evidence of the lack of understanding regarding a*daptation of content.* First of all, some professors and student researchers confused the readings, content concepts, key vocabulary, and adjustment to speech with the adaptation of content.

4. Also, a few student researchers were not clear about how professors should adapt content and if it was necessary to make adaptations

according to students' level of proficiency. The following examples show the misunderstandings on adaptation of content:

- "The students had difficulty in understanding the adaptation of content." It seems that the observers (professors and student researchers) confused content concepts with adaptation of content.
- "Previous reading helped students discuss and take positions according to a scale of identity." The student researcher was not clear about how professors should adapt content.

- "The readings and the activities were prepared according to students' level." In this specific example, students were already on a high-intermediate level, so the professor did not have to adapt content.

Given that in some cases professors have to teach from complex textbooks, they have to adapt content according to students' level of proficiency. The purpose of adapting content is to make information accessible for all learners (Echevarria, Short & Vogt, 2004).

Aspects of Lesson Preparation Teachers Seemed to Feel Comfortable with:

A. Analysis of Professors' Lesson Planning Template and Meeting Discussions
1. Professors' lesson planning template revealed that almost all of them stated accurate *content concepts* (i.e. standards, comprehensible input, SIOP, ELL, sociolinguistic domains, status, linguistic choice, puberty, ecological approach, *etnocidio, acultur*ación). However, it was necessary to show professors that there is a distinction between content concepts and key vocabulary. During the workshop, professors realized that the concepts they take from class readings with specific lesson purposes are content concepts and not new vocabulary for students. Nevertheless, we all agreed that in courses like literature, key vocabulary can be taken as content concepts.

2. In general, professors did not have any problem when planning *meaningful activities*; all activities matched with the stated objectives. However, professors needed to be more explicit when planning class activities so that they could be clearer when giving instructions. All researchers' concluded that lesson plans should be

so clear that anybody could follow them. In this respect, some professors pointed out that it is a lot of work to plan classes considering the SIOP model, but they agreed that the outcomes show how worthwhile it is for both teachers and learners.

B. Analysis of Teachers' Reflections Before and After Delivering their Lessons

❖ Some other professors developed their class smoothly and were happy with their delivery because they were helped by students in the construction of the objectives. These professors found their students' contributions in this area very meaningful, particularly because of the way students had distinguished content and language objectives.

Action Plan

Based on our qualitative data analysis of lesson preparation, we found that professors at ÚNICA had some weaknesses such as: a misunderstanding of content and language objectives, a difficulty in selecting verbs when stating objectives and higher order questions, a lack of use and resources of supplementary materials, some confusion between content concepts and key vocabulary, and the need for a clarification of what *adaptation of content* is. In order to overcome these weaknesses, we did a workshop about each element of lesson preparation in which professors needed assistance and guidance. In that meeting, professors had the opportunity to discuss and clarify their misunderstandings and misconceptions.

Our recommendations were as follows:

1. Regarding content and language objectives we recommended that professors bear in mind that the language objective must integrate the four basic linguistic skills in order to attain content objectives.

2. Regarding professors' difficulties in selecting measurable verbs when stating objectives, we recommended that professors should check Bloom's Taxonomy which is a helpful tool, especially for more precisely defining the verbs that show what students are expected to attain.

63

3. Another important issue when analyzing data was that sometimes it was hard for professors to state higher order questions. Our recommendation was that professors should address higher order

questions based on students' experiences and background. Once that is done, students will be trained to see things from different perspectives and will be forced to have their own point of view regarding a specific topic. Also, the use of higher order questions help students have a deeper understanding and development of their learning strategies. Thus, again we suggested that professors revise Bloom's taxonomy and that they concentrate on the levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, those which are considered to be truly high order thinking skills.

4. The lack of the use of resources for supplementary materials was a spot we found that professors needed to consider if they want to make content more comprehensible for students. In order to overcome this weakness we recommended that professors ask the university for materials they think are useful and necessary. Some of the resources professors asked for were: a closet with shelves for the faculty to store materials, curtains in all the classrooms in order to effectively darken the room (for viewing audio-visual material), more video beams and laptops, markers, colored paper, tape, maps, laminated graphic organizers, camcorders, among other supplies.

5. Professors seemed to misunderstand the difference between adaptation of content and adjustment to speech. In our workshop we explained these concepts and it was made clear that adaptation of content deals with how they might simplify difficult readings according to students' level of proficiency in order to make the knowledge of the text more accessible for readers.

Conclusion

The great importance of lesson preparation, the first component of the SIOP model, is well supported by the current theories of content-language integration. Collier is one of theorists that provides a great deal of research in terms of content-language integration when delivering lessons to ELLs. Bloom is another significant scholar that has endowed professors with a useful tool for stating measurable objectives in their lessons. He demonstrates that professors must motivate student to get involved in new processes in which learners can develop higher level thinking.

Bearing in mind the research questions previously stated, and the purpose of this study (which was to describe the experiences of professors at ÚNICA as they learn how to design and deliver lessons based on the SIOP model), we found that it was difficult for professors to state content

and language objectives due to the fact that they had some difficulties deciding which verbs best indicate how students' learning process will be measured. Additionally, after analyzing the data, we realized that professors needed not only to write the lesson objectives on the board, but that also they should read them aloud. Our data showed that professors needed to focus more on analysis, synthesis, and evaluation which are considered higher level thinking skills. The use of supplementary materials was something else professors had to consider in order to provide students with more comprehensible content. Additionally, we found that some professors had difficulties understanding the difference between adjustment to speech and adaptation of content. After some chats, professors ended up realizing that the purpose of adapting content is to make information accessible for all learners.

Considering that the second part of this study focuses on the specific aspects of lesson preparation professors seemed to feel comfortable with, our conclusion (based on the lesson planning template) was that professors do not have any problem stating accurate content concepts. Also, lesson planning templates revealed that professors planned meaningful activities effectively since all activities matched with the stated objectives. Finally, after looking at the aforementioned examples, we agreed together, both professors and student researchers, that language objectives must integrate the four linguistic skills in order to attain solid content objectives. All these are old tasks that teachers, through years of experience, are normally quite familiar with, of course. However, the research allowed our team to discover new dimensions and fresh aspects so that the duties of an instructor may not ever become monotonous or dry.

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Edith Viviana Morales Enao is a ninth semester student of Bilingual Education at the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana* (ÚNICA) in Bogotá, Colombia. She has worked over two years at English schools in Bogotá teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). In 2006 she, along with Josephine Taylor, the academic director of Centro Colombo Americano, presented at the 9th Annual ELT Conference in Bogotá, a workshop called *Intercultural Competence without International Experience*. After this conference they both published this article online at the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). At this moment she is working on the second phase of a research project on the applicability of the *Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol* (SIOP) at the higher education level. Her research interests include intercultural communication, language, academic and cognitive development in L1 and L2, language-content integration, teacher training, and teaching models to support English language learners. As an educator, she is passionate about addressing the needs of students' learning processes. Email: vivimo83@yahoo.com

Angélica Paola Peña Piragua is an eighth semester student of Bilingual Education at the *Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana* ÚNICA in Bogotá, Colombia. Last year, the first semester of 2007, she worked full time at *Colegio Nueva Granada*, as a teacher assistant in K-5. Since 2007, supervised by The Learning Center of the school, she started to take a part in the program *Lectura Exitosa* that promotes helping kids to develop their reading skills in Spanish. Also, as Angélica has been studying at the university, she has worked for some English schools in Bogotá teaching English as second language. Nowadays, she is working as a junior teacher for the *Centro Colombo Americano* and as a student researcher for ÚNICA. The research the university is carrying out is about the applicability of the *Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol* (SIOP) on the college level and professors' experiences as they learn how to prepare their lessons based on this model. E-mail: Angie_u04@yahoo.com