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*Sequentially, or by Negotiation? How do Secondary Subject Teachers Think about Teaching English Language Learners?*

English Language Learners (ELLs) studying in New Zealand secondary schools traditionally received most of their English language instruction through specialist classes for English to speakers of other languages (ESOL). Increasingly, subject-area teachers are urged to take responsibility for teaching the language specific to their subject areas. Some teacher professional development has been implemented to prepare existing teachers for this new role. However, it may be that certain secondary teachers are likely to resist these new ways of thinking and teaching.

A multiple case study explored subject teachers’ responses to these expectations by seeking their views on how ELLs best learn within the mainstream subject-area classroom in the high stakes environment of their final years at secondary school. The theoretical framework was drawn from international literature on educational linguistics, particularly content-based language teaching (CBLT) (Echevarria, Vogt & Short, 2008; Walqui & van Lier, 2010). This allowed comparisons between subject teachers’ expressed and observed pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) (Shulman, 1987), and pedagogies considered to advantage students learning an additional language -which might be termed linguistic pedagogical content knowledge[[1]](#footnote-1) (Love, 2010).

Using a qualitative exploratory case study approach, this presentation draws on data from one case within a wider study that examined the beliefs and teaching approaches identified by secondary school curriculum teachers as beneficial to learning for ELL students in their year 12 classes. Data were gathered using a questionnaire, interviews, and classroom observations for participant teachers, then analysed thematically using a conceptual framework derived from CBLT principles. Essentially, these principles recommend that teachers ensure that their ELL students’ experiential background is the point of departure for exploring new ideas, that teachers maintain high academic expectations, engage all students in quality interactions, and sustain an academic language focus regardless of their subject area.

The participants’ approaches to teaching were shaped by their disciplinary beliefs and practices, and there was scant evidence of attention to linguistic considerations. Their openness to applying a systematic language focus to their teaching related to whether their curriculum area had sequential (hard), or negotiable (soft) conceptions of knowledge and pedagogy (Biglan, 1973a, 1973b). Teachers of subjects such as statistics and chemistry, where knowledge is considered to be gained incrementally or in a predetermined sequence, largely viewed knowledge in their discipline as absolute and quantifiable. Their ways of making meaning and sharing disciplinary knowledge differed markedly from the less defined subject areas and negotiated values held by those of their colleagues in the social sciences (Hyland, 2008).

This presentation focuses on the beliefs and practices from the case of one experienced chemistry teacher whose class included a number of ELL students. It contrasts his expressed pedagogical content knowledge with that recommended by research from content-based language teaching. This teacher held high expectations of his students yet struggled to establish the prior learning of the ELLs in his class. He favoured one-to-one interactions between individual students and himself in order to support these students and did not routinely establish interactive tasks among students. Although he had a strong personal interest in learning languages, he felt that language instruction was best left to specialist ESOL teachers. Once an ELL student had mastered sufficient English, s/he could then begin the task of learning science. This teacher had no conception of language as a means of expressing disciplinary thinking, and did not feel a responsibility to teach language in the course of his subject lessons. Furthermore, he shared that he had “done” professional development of how to teach ELL students, and this was better suited to new teachers given that such knowledge was common sense to experienced teachers. There was no evidence that he accepted that there is a specialist body of knowledge about language learning.

This teacher’s beliefs about how a discipline should be taught and learned disposed him to disregard practices considered to accelerate ELLs’ language acquisition. Despite some involvement in professional development about language learning, this teacher showed limited familiarity with second language acquisition concepts (content knowledge) and related pedagogy. For example, this participant did not differentiate between the learning required as part of the process of acquiring an additional language, and remediation for students challenged by academic language forms used in their dominant language (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007). Additionally, he interpreted “language teaching” to mean teaching subject-specific vocabulary. This participant did not routinely break complex lexis into affixes and root words. Other language features were also overlooked, such as text-types or syntax, suggesting that language challenges facing ELL learners may have been invisible to this teacher.

Since he was unaware of this gap in his pedagogical knowledge, he saw no reason to develop reciprocating relationships with ESOL teaching colleagues. Nor was he disposed to extend his existing pedagogical knowledge through professional development opportunities. He already had extensive PCK in chemistry, why would he need to extend this to include linguistic PCK?

The case study of this chemistry teacher is certainly not generalizable. However, it is indicative of the dispositions held by other teachers of sequential disciplines in the wider study. It suggests that some teachers may not optimise classroom conditions to promote language as well as content learning. In fact, this teacher actively discounted pedagogies promoting peer interaction as being unsuitable and insufficiently academic for senior high school students.

In contrast, teachers from negotiable subjects routinely included cooperative tasks in their teaching repertoire, and literature reveals that these benefit language acquisition (Haneda & Wells, 2008). So, even if teachers of negotiable subjects have little knowledge of second language acquisition, they already share similar epistemologies and practice some of the pedagogies in common with educational linguistics. This is likely to dispose them to be more receptive to learning about linguistic pedagogical content knowledge than their colleagues from sequential disciplines.

Finally, this study found that when compared to the conditions recommended by literature, subject PCK alone is not likely to accelerate learning for ELLs. While teachers of negotiable subjects are likely to be easier to engage in professional learning than their sequential colleagues, unless teachers extend their teaching knowledge to include linguistic PCK, ELLs are likely to struggle within an impoverished curriculum. Given the entrenched and discipline-specific epistemologies displayed by the participating chemistry teacher, even in the face of an urgent need for pedagogies that accelerate language learning, there are implications for the design of pre-service and in-service teacher education, as well as the academic success of large numbers of secondary students.

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1. Love refers to literacy pedagogical content knowledge but this paper prefers *linguistic* pedagogical content knowledge to differentiate second language acquisition from literacy learning in the dominant language [↑](#footnote-ref-1)