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Report from the Morning Sessions at TALGS 2009

Hey--these people know how to organize a conference. A tip of the hat to East Carolina University graduate students Zuzana Elliott, Yi Sun, Lamont Cannon, and Chad Elliott, and their mentor, Dr. Lida Cope, along with a number of other key individuals who helped to make the sixth annual TALGS one-day conference (TESOL Applied Linguistics Graduate Students) on February 21, 2009, in Greenville, North Carolina, a spectacular success. There were 90+ attendees at the event, and the East Carolina University community did a superb job of giving participants an unforgettable experience.

Concurrent sessions were just 30 minutes, so speakers really had to be on their toes, talking quickly, and moving efficiently through their powerpoints. Participants go a clear sense of what each speaker felt was most crucial to communicate, and, at this pace, there was no time to lose enthusiasm or interest. In addition to a core contingent of local and regional Carolina speakers, there were presenters from California, New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and England.

Of three concurrent sessions at 9:00, I attended "Corpus linguistics: A real approach to language teaching," a standing-room-only presentation by Courtney Cunningham of Western Carolina University. "ESL students should be exposed to as much authentic text as possible," she said, "because students learn English in order to use it."

Cunningham gave several interesting examples of ways to use corpus research to know the frequency of certain phrases, to find strategies for interpreting, and "to determine how a word behaves."

"ESL students want to use English in the real world, as naturally as possible," she explained. "They want to be able to function communicatively in the target language community." Recommended corpus Web sites were: http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/, americannationalcorpus.org, quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/ , www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/research/sbcorpus_obtaining.html, and www.athel.com .

Cunningham suggested that teachers consult corpora, both written and

spoken, to develop lessons using authentic text; use sentences from corpus collections for vocabulary purposes; and use corpus data to answer questions about language that cannot be answered based on intuition. She also recommended choosing textbooks with a corpus approach, such as Pearson/Longman's "Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English (2002), and consulting research on using corpora to teach.

At 9:35, I attended "Making the standards 'real' through teaching thematic units," by Kristie Barnhill, a kindergarten teacher in Los Puentes, a two-way Spanish immersion program at Snow Hill Primary School, in Snow Hill, North Carolina.

Her students include ELLs from Spanish-speaking families together with children from English-speaking families who opt in to the dual-language program. All students receive the curriculum through both English instruction and Spanish instruction. Barnhill provides the English instruction, including accommodations for English language learners.

She brought the English Language Proficiency Standards alive with video clips and explanations from her own classroom. In one clip, for storytime, Barnhill introduced and reviewed vocabulary with pictures on a board, as well as puppetry with nifty stuffed animals and other theme-based puppets, purchased with her own money from http://www.nationalschoolproducts.com .

"It's important that students know what the goals are or were themselves," said Barnhill, who conducts discussions with her students in which they are asked to remember and express the standards-based goals of their class activities. She also gave nice examples of ways to seamlessly incorporate assessment into her lessons, for example, working knowledge of shapes into a math conversation. "I try to find ways to make it a group assessment and individualized at the same time," she explained.

In addition to the sea-shape math lesson she demonstrated, Barnhill recounted having very good success with a camping theme, including using a tent as the reading center and learning about the solar system and stars, etc... She bundles more than one standard into a lesson or long-term theme. "You can tie it all in and make it work for the children," she explained.

After the coffee break, I next attended, at 10:25, "Team teaching by a native English teacher and a Korean English teacher in Korean public schools," by EunHi Seo of the State University of New York at Albany. Seo explained her research on patterns of interaction and classroom

dynamics in a new paradigm that teams native speakers of English with Korean teachers in Korean K-12 public schools.

The native English teachers in this new team-teaching program implemented by Korea's Ministry of Education have bachelor's degrees from the U.S., Canada, England, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa. Their roles are to provide English support and to facilitate the professional development of Korean English teachers, according to Seo.

The needs of students in these Korean classrooms, she explained, are improved results on entrance exams and in the job market, as well as enhanced academic success, motivation, and progress in English skills.

Seo's research questions were: 1) What patterns or roles make their team teaching effective? and 2) What instructional implications can be drawn from the findings?

She analyzed data from three different classrooms: grade 5, grade 6, and grade 7. The Korean teachers in each case were winners of a government sponsored English teaching contest.

"I focused on instructional activities and instructor development and activity flows," said Seo, who described the following typical pattern in lesson delivery:

1) introduction
2) review
3) presentation of objectives
4) activity 1
5) activity 2
6) activity 3
7) review

The effective roles of the native speakers were: direct modeling of pronunciation; feedback on grammatical correctness; and promotion of student involvement. The effective roles on Korean teachers were: managing activities; providing L1 support; rephrasing when Korean students could not understand the native pronunciation; and promoting participation and cooperation.

Seo used video clips to demonstrate a change in locus of control over time between first grade and fifth grade, with native teachers taking more of a leading role while student dependence on the Korean teacher fades away. She emphasized that the value of native English-speaking teachers in the Korean EFL setting is not their familiarity with Western

contexts, but rather their ability to function as an effective model.

One intriguing aspect of Seo's research design attempts to clarify the settings of these special team-teaching arrangements and experienc, es by using Jane Agee's "Winks upon winks" framework, from a 2002 article in the journal Qualitative Studies in Education (v. 15, n. 5, pp. 569-585).

Seo suggests that the Korean team-teaching settings are culturally and historically rooted in Confucianism, which, according to her context model, affects perceptions of seniority, teacher's status, and face saving. This cultural and historical lens coexists, says Seo, with the strategic needs of the situation/setting, including a way to handle large class sizes, curriculum goals, and a clear view of the social value of targeted English skills.

Keys to success of these team-teaching arrangements are, according to her research findings: effective cross- cultural understanding; effective locus of control for language teaching; and effective pedagogies reflecting ecological perspectives. Again, Seo's analysis applies concepts related to "fluidity," "boundedness," and multiple lenses in Agee's framework.

At 11:00, I attended "Languaging: Finding a balance between form and function," by Forrest Caskey, of Western Carolina University. Caskey is a lively presenter, with a quick wit and irreverent sense of humor. "I don't like dichotomies," he announced, eschewing both extremes in the form/function debate.

Caskey took participants on a kaleidoscopic tour of about a decade of research, from Willis (1996) to Kramsch and Whiteside (2007), and including names such as Ellis, Brown, and Lightbown, a period of time he labeled as "a decade of bi-partisan bickering."

Caskey sees Swain (2007) as a voice of hope and balance, resolving the form/function dichotomy into an approach that Caskey suggests falls under a sociocultural context, with Vgotsky as the "backbone" and languaging as the "spinal fluid."

Key components of Swain's languaging concept are: collaborative dialogues; an output-hypothesis related to Krashen's input-hypothesis; and the idea of "languaging" itself. Caskey also fits the following terms under Swain's languaging umbrella: task-based learning; private speech; and language play.

There are social as well as cognitive aspects to Swain's languaging concept, according to Caskey, who highlighted the fact that "students are

actually talking about the language" in a "conversation in the target language about grammar, creating the output in order [for the instructor] to teach them."

He described several teaching techniques that can be used to implement the languaging concept. Dictogloss entails the instructor reading a passage to students, once fast and the second time slowly. Then students get together and talk about what was said. He suggested recording students talking to each other and to themselves.

Dictogloss "helps you notice the gap," explained Caskey, and the students can negotiate the missing aspects together, in conversations facilitated by a teacher. He suggests that the teacher in this role is able to see where and how to scaffold the learning for students.

Another technique, borrowed from Robert Slavin (1983) is the jigsaw task, in which different students focus on the various pieces of a text and/or auditory experience, bringing together their work products to help each other learn and remember the ideas. "This helps language go into long-term memory," said Caskey.

Collaborative dialogues, a central technique in Swain's languaging approach, means students are talking about: 1) when a word is used; 2) where the word is put; and 3) how it is used. Caskey emphasized that collaborative dialogue has obvious corpus applications as well.

In an energetic question and answer period following his presentation, Caskey agreed with the audience that students ought to be asking larger questions, too, such as "what are we learning?, "how did we do that?" and "why did we do that?" Teachers ought to be asking themselves, according to Caskey, "how do we empower our students to talk about why they do things?"

By Robb Scott
Editor, ESL MiniConference Online
Robb@eslminiconf.net

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