Spanish Immersion Materials and the Secondary Classroom Ecology

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Background and Research Questions

Secondary Immersion Programs & Materials Use

-Secondary Spanish immersion programs are a continuation of elementary dual language and immersion programs in which students learn subject matter content through a second language.

-Finding and utilizing appropriate materials is an unique challenge for these programs since materials must present complex academic content at an appropriate linguistic level.

-Immersion teachers frequently cite the lack of easily accessible, published materials as an impediment in their instruction (Fortune, Tedick & Walker, 2008; Cammarata & Tedick, 2012), and teachers spend considerable time and energy adapting, translating or creating original materials (Lyster, 2007).
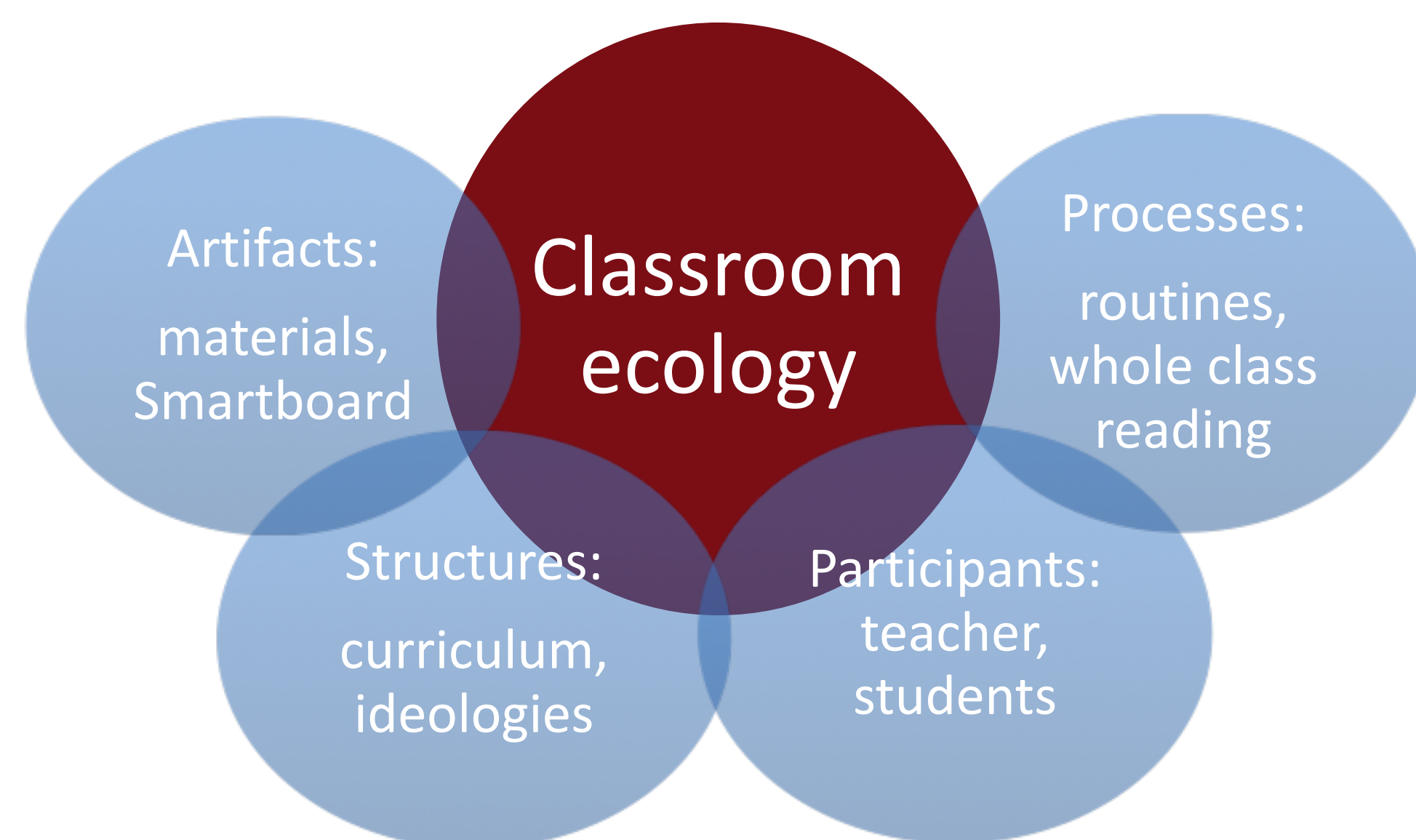
Research Questions

What roles do materials play in the ecology of a secondary Spanish immersion classroom?

a. What roles do materials play in the **content instruction**?

b. What roles do materials play in the **target language instruction**?

c. What roles do materials play in **language use**?

Classroom Ecology

An ecological approach to classroom-based research views the classroom as an unpredictable ecosystem of interactions through which a complex social system emerges (van Lier, 2004).
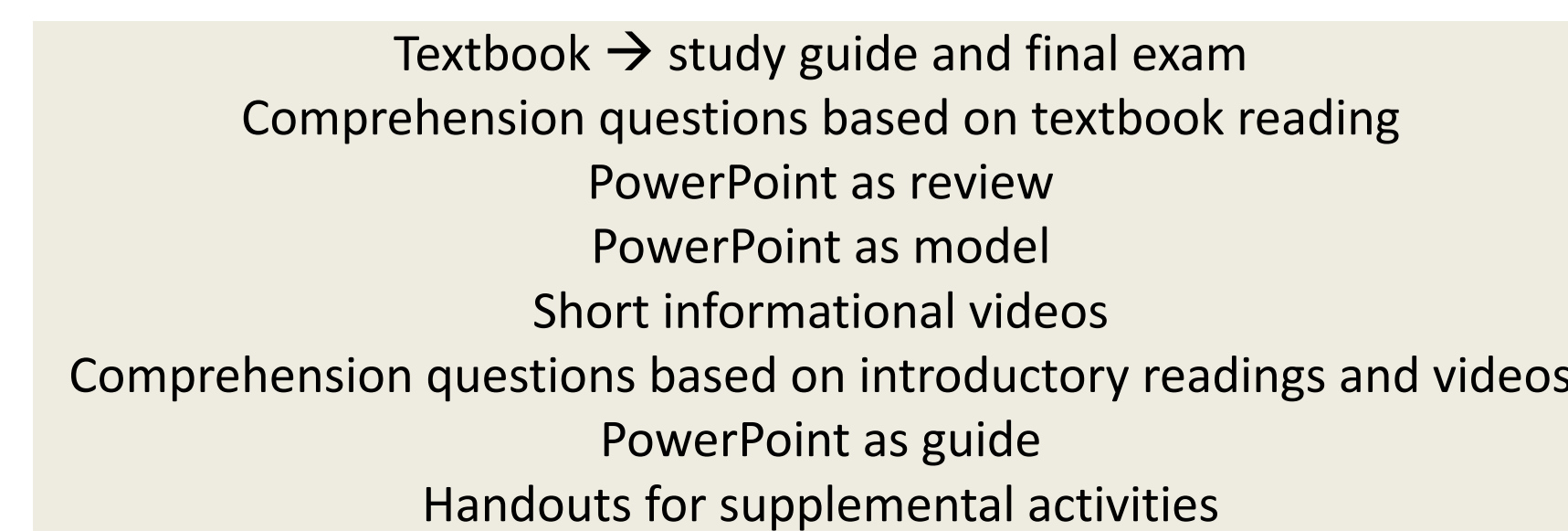

Methodology

-10-day seventh-grade Spanish social studies unit focused on a survey of Africa (geography, history, culture)

-Classroom observations and field notes, audio-recordings of all classroom discourse, materials used during the unit, and two semi-structured interviews with the teacher

-Thematic data analysis coding for each sub-question as well as relationships among ecological resources
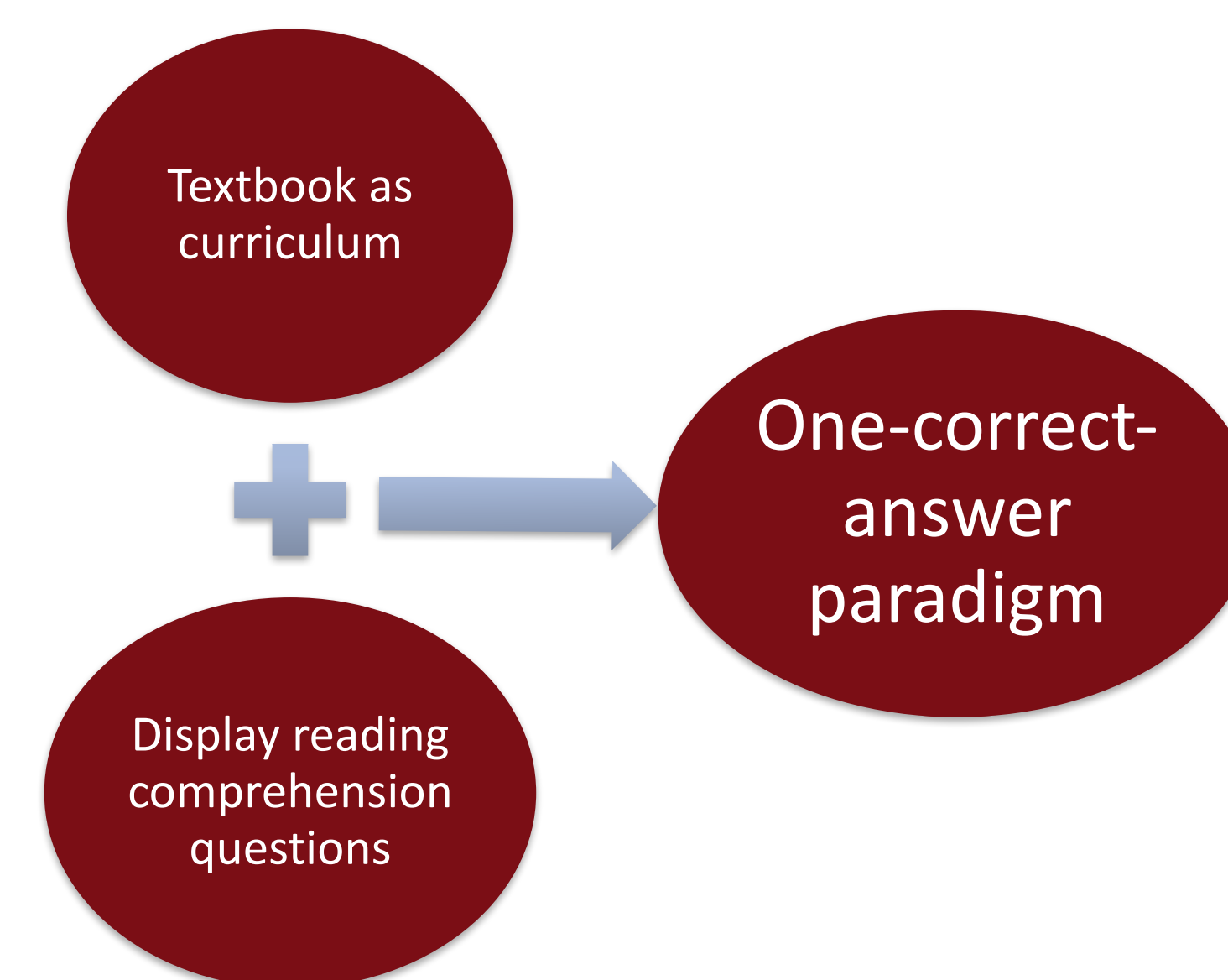
Results

Materials and Content Instruction

> Textbook → study guide and final exam
> Comprehension questions based on textbook reading
> PowerPoint as review
> PowerPoint as model
> Short informational videos
> Comprehension questions based on introductory readings and videos
> PowerPoint as guide
> Handouts for supplemental activities

Hierarchy of materials in terms of importance to content instruction

Although the teacher did not explicitly view the textbook as the content curriculum, his pedagogical choices and discourse positioned the textbook as the curriculum as reality of the unit. While guiding the students through three chapters sequentially, the teacher provided them with packets of reading comprehension questions, most of which were display questions.

The weight of the textbook as a *structure* of the course interacted with the *process* of display comprehension questions to form a one-correct-answer instructional paradigm. This paradigm proved to be an even more powerful *structure* that formed relationships with many *processes* in the class

Materials and Language Instruction

Language instruction in this class was almost entirely concentrated on content-specific vocabulary rather than linguistic structures, which seems related to the **one-correct-answer paradigm**. Students and the teacher focused vocabulary instruction on words that were necessary to answer the display reading comprehension questions

Extract from observational field notes:

"The language instruction during this segment is nearly entirely vocabulary. Students ask about a number of words in the text, such as *ganado* [cattle], (which the teacher explains and then translates), *abundante* [abundant], *precipitación* [precipitation], *occidental* [western], *desertificación* [desertification] (which is defined in the book). Students do use some vocabulary from the text in their speech, but this appears to be only to answer the content question" (Field notes, 11/29/16).

Materials and Language Instruction, cont.

Syntactic and Tense/Aspect Analysis of textbook

• First 15 sentences of two sections of the textbook. The first describes the geography of northern Africa and the second outlines the history of Ancient Egypt.

	Geography	Ancient Egypt
Sentence type (total instances)		
Simple Sentence	9	11
Appositive	2	1
Relative clause	1	1
Coordinating conjunction	2 (y, pero)	2 (y, o)
Compound complex sentence	1	0
Verb tense (total instances)		
Present tense	16	1
Imperfect tense/aspect	0	4
Preterite tense/aspect	0	13

- This analysis shows that this material did not provide natural opportunities for syntactic or discourse-level language instruction and the input provided by the textbook is not always as complex as might be expected.

Materials and Language Use

-When working with the **textbook** or associated handouts, as in the following whole-class reading excerpt, students overwhelmingly performed **communicative language functions.** (Excerpt was originally in Spanish.)

1	Teacher:	The first question and the second question Jonah just read the answers. So how great that we have Jonah here.
2	FS1:	Do we have to write in complete sentences?
3	Teacher:	Complete sentences. I wrote it in the instructions. ((students working))
4	FS2:	What is *trasladaron*? ((from question #2))
5	Teacher:	To move. *Trasladar* is to move as a family.
6	MS1:	I don't understand number one.
7	Teacher:	It's the paragraph that Jonah just read. Where did they live? What is *una aldea*?
8	MS?:	From Egypt
9	Teacher:	In a small village. Yes, a small city, a. A small village. From..
10	FS?:	Where is it? ((referring to where the information is in the text))

Turn	Language function
2	Clarifying guidelines
4	Seeking information
6	Expressing confusion
8	Recounting information (academic)
10	Searching for answer/ asking for help

-Student performed more **academic language functions** during activities related to the **PowerPoint** or ancillary materials unrelated to the textbook. (Excerpt originally in Spanish.)

Discussion prompted by Essential Question on PowerPoint: Who should benefit from a country's resources?

1	MS1:	I think that um like everyone should have link 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 it that
2	Teacher:	Because it is an incentive to work?
3	MS1:	Yes. And it is more um, but like, if you are like *in between (said in English)* two-
4	Teacher:	In between
5	MS1:	In between two jobs uh it is like *welfare*, and they should have the resources if they need, but only if they need
6	Teacher:	Okay, good.

Turn	Language function
1	Expressing opinion, providing justification
3	Expressing a hypothetical situation
5	Expressing an opinion

Discussion and Implications

- The **textbook as curriculum** and **one-correct-answer instructional paradigm** functioned as *structures* in the classroom ecology that communicated to students that their task was to find and report a correct answer rather than utilize higher order academic thinking.

- The ecological consequences of these *structures* included almost no intentional language instruction beyond vocabulary and a stunted range of student discourse functions, both of which could have implications for student language development and, later academic achievement.

- Given the roles these secondary materials played in the classroom ecology, future immersion materials should be designed to intentionally integrate content and language while promoting academic student discourse.

  - Language-focused modifications, dialogic activities and referential questions

- Immersion teacher education needs to include training on analyzing materials' affordances and strategies for materials modification.

References:

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