Various models of the integration of language and content in the classroom have been proposed. Such work has drawn on systemic functional linguistics, conversation analysis, SLA and other approaches. Common problems with these ideas include the separation of language from content, a related over-emphasis on language learning and a lack of appreciation of the nature of learning in specific content areas.

In this paper, in an effort to develop an alternative approach, I start with two key ideas from Bakhtin’s dialogic theory of language: (1) every utterance is filled with and shaped by the tension between unitary language ideologies and heteroglossia, and (2) language use is always an encounter with otherness. From this perspective, learning content can be understood as the appropriation through dialogue of the ‘alien’ word of the content domain. At the same time, learners (must) animate these words with intentions of their own, so that there are tensions between ‘standard’, ‘normal’ or ‘formal’ ways of talking content, and the inevitable heteroglossia of a classroom full of multilingual learners.

I have been working with these ideas to understand the integration of language and content learning in four second language mathematics classrooms in different contexts in the greater Ottawa region of Canada. The sites were all in elementary schools and included both mainstream and sheltered classes in Anglophone and francophone schools. Students included recent immigrants, aboriginal children and students in a French immersion program. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in each site, for between three months and two years.

Drawing on recordings, fieldnotes and interviews with participants, I illustrate how the dialogicality of classroom interaction means that the teacher’s use of mathematical terms ‘contains’ the students, while the students’ more informal expression of mathematics ‘contains’ the teacher. Learning arises through the interaction between these different voices.

Keywords: Bakhtin, language and content, mathematics.