POINT-COUNTERPOINT

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Literacy instruction for students acquiring English: Moving beyond the immersion debate

Point

The best way to teach children English literacy skills is to immerse them completely in English.

Counterpoint

The best way to teach children English literacy skills is through their native language.

Much of the debate surrounding the education of language minority students has focused on whether or not those immersed in English will fare better than those initially taught in their native language. Some argue that immersion quickens second language acquisition by stressing only the new target language (e.g., Chavez, 1991; Imhoff, 1990; Porter, 1990). Others claim that a gradual transition to English via instruction in the native language assures student success (e.g., Collier, 1995; Cummins, 1993; Lapp & Flood, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 1995).

The controversy that swirls around second language education in the United States can be traced to deeply held ideas among many Americans, the educational community not excepted. In this column we examine several of these ideas in light of current research, dispelling some as myths and challenging others.

Myths about second language education

Myth 1: Immersion works for everyone. Many Americans believe that yesterday's immigrants prospered without special programs and that the public schools successfully weaned students from their native languages by immersing them in English. Educational attainment data on immigrant Americans, however, show neither of these beliefs to be true. Indeed, bilingualism was an accepted fact of life among the early immigrants to the U.S. New arrivals strived to preserve their heritage by preserving their native language. Europeans established schools in the New World that provided instruction in native languages.

Immigrant groups, including Italian, Polish, Czech, French, Dutch and German, introduced their languages into elementary and secondary schools, either as separate subjects or as the language of instruction (Crawford, 1989). According to Crawford, German-speaking Americans operated schools in their own tongue as early as 1694 in Philadelphia, a practice that prevailed until the early 20th century. For much of the 19th century, the structure of American public education allowed immigrant groups to incorporate linguistic and cultural traditions in the schools, which supported the transition to second language programs.

Nevertheless, immigrant children were more likely to sink than swim in English-only classrooms, where they experienced considerable difficulty. Historically, English-only instruction has been nationally ineffective. According to Crawford (1989),

> in study after study, a non-English background has been correlated with higher rates of falling behind, failing, and dropping out. Language minority youths are one and a half times more likely than their English language counterparts to have discontinued school before completing twelve years, and Hispanic youths are more than twice as likely. (p. 14)

As recently as 1994 the dropout rate for Hispanics (ages 14–34) was 31% compared to 7% for Anglos. Also, language minority children are placed in special classes for the educationally handicapped in disproportionate numbers. In 1980, Hispanic children in Texas, for example, were overrepre-

sented by 315% in the learning disabled category (Crawford, 1989). These data certainly are ample evidence to dispel the myth that immigrants have or can learn English without special programs.

Myth 2: Native language programs are detrimental to literacy growth. Some educators argue that students in bilingual programs do not learn English and that they never do well enough in academic subjects to join the mainstream. Yet research has found that children who participate in properly designed bilingual programs reach satisfactory levels of competence in all academic areas (Krashen & Biber, 1988).

Moreover, the use of the native language to develop the academic skills of students acquiring English appears beneficial for helping students avoid cognitive confusion and achievement lags in their school performance (Hakuta & Diaz, 1984; Krashen & Biber, 1988; Thomas & Collier, 1995). Data from bilingual programs in California, for example, show that children who participate in properly designed bilingual education programs acquire English rapidly and typically achieve at grade level norms and above in English and mathematics after 3–5 years. From these data, it can be concluded that bilingual education may be the best means to develop English as a second language programs.

Myth 3: The sooner students are transferred out of native language instruction the better. Too often, U.S. policy makers mistakenly believe that the first and only thing that language minority students must do is learn English. Studies by Ramirez, Yuen, and Ramey (1991) and Collier (1995) found that "late-exit" bilingual education programs, where students received native language instruction at least through the elementary grades, were most successful for helping students achieve academic success in English. Postponing the teaching of academics until students develop the academic proficiency in English they need to learn subject content does not appear educationally worthwhile. It takes students longer to acquire English when there is less native language support (Thomas & Collier, 1995).

Myth 4: Teaching children to read in their native language hinders learning to read in English. Some educators and policy makers think that diverse bilingual education is an obstacle to literacy achievement and produces students who are illiterate in two languages. The research literature does not support this myth, but in fact substantial research has shown that "the fastest route to second language literacy is through the first language" (Krashen & Biber, 1988, p. 22). Empirical evidence has shown that children who are dominant in a language other than English acquire academic language and literacy skills rapidly and better in both the native language and English when they attain literacy proficiency in the first language. Many researchers (Cummins, 1989; Krashen & Biber, 1988) have found that instruction in the students' native language simultaneously promotes the development of literacy skills in both the native language and a second language.

The linguistic interdependence principle asserts that certain processes are basic to reading and that once learned they can be applied to reading any or almost any language (Krashen & Biber, 1988; Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991). Specifically, when children learn about the intricacies of print relationships through materials that highlight their own language and social reality, the linguistic interdependence principle predicts that they will be able to extend their repertoire of literacy expertise to a range of language and social contexts in their second language (Pardo & Tinajero, 1993). Therefore children who learn to read in their native language need not totally relearn to read in English. Learning to read in the native language is beneficial, not detrimental, because students apply many of the skills and strategies they acquired to read in their native language to reading in English.

For more than 25 years, the issue of how best to address the needs of students acquiring English has been vigorously debated. But the debate has never clearly focused on pedagogical issues, having run amok in political sentiment and controversy. However, given recent demographic trends, which suggest that in the near future, language minority and limited English proficient students will compose a greater proportion of the U.S. school-age population than monolingual English speakers, we must move beyond the immersion debate to a more pressing concern about how to provide powerful learning environments for students acquiring English. This topic must have our attention if we are to responsibly and creatively meet the challenge of effective instruction for second language learners. Our failure to realize the potential benefits of native language instruction has kept us from focusing on the most effective ways to teach children.

Fortunately a substantial knowledge base on literacy instruction for nonnative speakers has been developed by educators and researchers over the past 2 decades. It has yielded excellent instructional practices that teachers can use with confidence. These best practices include recommendations related to program, methods, materials, and parental involvement.

Program

Rather than attempting to eradicate students' native languages, we must use, affirm, and maintain children's native languages as a foundation for academic success. To build program capacity, three initiatives show promise:

- change the "quick-exit" mentality of bilingual programs to "late-exit," which gives students the opportunity to develop high levels of proficiency in both the native language and English before being mainstreamed.
- implement more two-way programs in which bilingualism is promoted for *all* students.
- replace traditionally taught ESL-only, pullout programs with quality programs that integrate state-of-the-art second language instructional practices with continuous staff development and emphasize respect for students' native language and culture (Collier, 1995).

Methods

In the past 2 decades reading and language arts educators' thinking about children's reading and writing development has changed dramatically (e.g., Flood, Jensen, Lapp, & Squire, 1991). As a result of new understandings, a learner-centered, holistic perspective has emerged. The result, a "new literacy" with new practices, has influenced

instruction in English, in native languages, and in ESL. This new view of language and literacy development includes interactive practices such as:

- pairing students heterogeneously for activities such as partner "reading" of big books, story retelling, story mapping, illustrating a new ending to a story, or character mapping;
- using wordless picture books to elicit language and encourage students to produce longer, more detailed, coherent, and cohesive texts;
- incorporating language experience activities to integrate children's ideas, interests, experiences, and natural languages;
- using shared reading activities to expose children to the written and oral forms of language and to provide them with numerous opportunities to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills;
- using songs, poems, stories, games, role plays, story theater, puppetry tapes, dramatizations, and story-telling activities (which encourage physical, visual, and oral participation) to allow students to use natural English while providing a meaningful, motivating, and enjoyable context for learning;
- using authentic literature to nurture children's language development and to provide language models.

Materials

In these days of limited budgets, funds must be invested wisely in instructional materials that support practices found to influence academic achievement. Look for materials and programs that

- organize the literature and grade-level content into thematic units keyed to curriculum goals;
- connect grade-level content with multilevel strategies;

- incorporate a wide array of hands-on learning activities designed to build academic language proficiency;
- give students access to the core curriculum;
- include a simple, effective teaching plan with authentic assessment to organize, manage, and monitor student progress; and
- incorporate a comprehensive plan for recent immigrants (newcomers) (Tinajero & Schifini, 1996).

Parental involvement

It is important to view parents as assets to the school program and welcome them as important partners in the education of their children. Parents have many talents and experiences. When we tap into these talents, a wealth of information can be shared.

We need to view parents as teaching partners in the classroom. Classrooms can become places where literacy and positive cultural understandings are nurtured and supported with their assistance. In the classroom, parents need to be encouraged to share ideas orally, stimulating conversations about topics that are important to the day's learning goals. Parents can help children who are still developing literacy in their first language by reading and responding to journal entries. Parents can read books in the children's languages and tell stories from their oral traditions. When children see their parents providing valuable experiences for their peers, they not only feel a sense of pride but also share positive feelings about their language and culture.

A final word

The "bilingual education is detrimental vs. bilingual education is beneficial" debate is over. Ample evidence favors bilingualism, bilingual education, and literacy in children's native

languages as the means to help children grow academically. What must ensue is a new and vigorous debate that centers on *how* our students who are acquiring English might best learn the literacy strategies and skills they need to participate fully, in school and out.

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Clearly a view

How do you describe what's in your mind's
    eye,
don't be afraid just give it a try.

Close your eyes, examine the scene,
what are the words that express what you
    mean?

Is it huge, is it wide,
are there glorious colors splashed from side
    to side?

Jot down your thoughts, your ideas if you
    please,
make me feel the icy cold blast or warm
    summer breeze.

Are the images clear? polished? concise?
have you revised more than once or twice?

Use the visual pictures you have formed in
    your head,
to express in writing a piece easily read.

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Reading aloud

I look around at the young faces,
    which have been sharpened by need.
    Their eyes turn toward me as I read.

I read aloud every day,
    today, a story by Richard Wright
    whose eyes have also seen poverty and
        despair.

New stories are found to read every day,
    sowing seeds of interest,
    a spark of curiosity.

I walk around the room as I read,
    touching a shoulder,
    lifting a sleepy head.

I don't know how to heal
    the pain these children feel,
    So I read aloud every day,

Seeking to give dreams they will save.

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