Success in Bilingual Programs:

Empowering all students

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Immigration around the world can create a significant issue on how to educate our young. From the language and cultural norms that we try to impart on children in both minority and majority groups, to the tolerance we have of different perspectives and ideologies; languages in contact may have a huge dividing force on members within a community. For the reason that almost everyone involved in education (parents, teachers and political groups within society) has some view on whether schools (a microcosm of society) should be monolingual, or promote some form of Bilingual education. The stance of favoring total assimilation into a culture, in order to promote harmony within communities may in some instances seem more advantageous to society as a whole. However, more and more literature (Baker, 2006; Hamers and Blanc, 2000; Krashen and McField, 2005; Krashen, retrieved 2008) has emerged that points to the possible benefits of maintaining a minority language and has started to dispel the myth that bilingual education is a handicap (Otheguy and Otto, 1980). Europe, Canada, Australia and many other localities are responding to this new insight into the advantageous aspects of bilingual education and a variety of bilingual programs, in an array of forms have started to emerge and prove themselves as agents of maximizing the full potential of all students, and in turn affect all the members of society. Two of the goals of bilingual education; that of promoting opportunities for children of minority languages and promoting understanding within majority language groups to foster a cooperative relationship between languages in contact, provide a backdrop for outlining the idea of success in bilingual education. This brief essay will delineate some of the aspects of a successful bilingual course by presenting some of the necessary qualities within both strong and weak forms of bilingual programs. In so doing, this essay will try to highlight a case for the maintenance and development of minority and heritage languages within communities.

A bilingual program’s efficacy is dependant upon the intricate relationships between a number of different factors, encompassing the individual person, classroom practices, school policies and the specific communities involved (Baker, 2006). As an overall goal, a successful program should endeavor to center on the learner and keep in mind that the purpose is to empower the minority language student, so that they may be able to participate fully within their local communities (Magana, 1972). In addition, a program should take advantage of the cultural diversity within its student body and develop an appreciation and understanding of alternative perspectives within all students. Baker (2006) lists a number of specific aims of bilingual
education that encompass a holistic view of the student within the context of his/her community, focusing on: creating harmony, enabling communication, preserving ethnic identity, and empowering individuals in society.

A program’s emphasis on assimilation or on pluralism will have a significant effect on the type of curriculum that is chosen. Assimilation as found in the U.S.A. and the U.K. has an aim at trying to quickly integrate minority language students into mainstream society. The programs that fit into this classification are monolingual subtractive forms and weak forms of bilingual education such as: Mainstreaming/Submersion (structured immersion/withdrawal classes/sheltered English, and content based ESL) and transitional programs. In addition there may be monolingual programs that are separatist in nature and promote division in groups within society, such as: Segregationist and Separatist (Baker, 2000). Pluralism on the other hand allows for the existence of groups with different ethnic, religious, or political backgrounds (Encarta, 1999). Strong forms of bilingual education tend to be inclusive and are additive in approach to language. They include: Immersion, maintenance/heritage language programs, two way/dual language and mainstream bilingual programs.

A dichotomy facing the administrators of these programs that deal with minority/herritage language students (mainstream or bilingual) is the distinction between transitional programs (moving the students as quickly as possible into the mainstream) and language maintenance: static (prevent loss of mother tongue) or developmental (develop proficiency and literacy in mother tongue) (Otheguy and Otto, 1980). The issue is whether it is necessary to maintain the mother tongue or even whether it is necessary to promote learning of a minority language learner’s L1, or to have a complete focus on the majority language at the expense of the minority language. Baker (2006) makes the distinction that transitional bilingual programs aim for a shift from the minority language to the dominant language and group, thus having a focus on social and cultural assimilation. Maintenance programs, however, seek to foster and strengthen the minority language developing within the learner a sense of ethnic identity. Arguments against maintenance state time constraints, competition with the majority language, and an idea that the minority language doesn’t have to be taught because the competency is already achieved.
Understanding the minority language learner within their specific learning context is one of the fundamental aspects in being able to provide opportunities for their successful learning. It is important to comprehend the importance of their minority language and culture and the effect on overall learning outcomes. Cummins (1978, 2000 as cited in Baker, 2006) suggests an interdependency model in which a child’s second language (L2) competence is at least partly dependent on the level of achievement within their first language. Previous models such as the balance theory limited the role of the mother tongue, and suggested that the amount of room for languages within a learner’s mind is limited and separate. More recent ideas understand that the mother tongue aids in the acquisition of an L2 (Hamers and Blanc 2000). Promotion of a mother tongue makes it easier for the learner to develop cognitive skills first, and then transfer knowledge and skills to their L2. This is central to many transitional type programs, where the initial emphasis is on the minority language. This allows individuals an opportunity to continue their cognitive development and make gains in their overall education, allowing social and emotional development first in their L1.

However, it has been suggested that this can lead to a subtractive type of bilingualism, which favors either the minority or majority language alone, and therefore promotes a form of mono-lingualism (Baker, 2006). The key aspect of achieving success in a transitional program would be to maintain a situation in which individuals can maximize their cognitive needs, but still make transitions toward their L2 and empowerment within the majority language community. Mack Drake (1978) highlights an example of a transitional program that helps to preserve the indigenous languages of Mexico, while still trying to promote learning of the majority language. The initial instruction in Mack Drake’s example is in the mother tongue, then a gradual replacement of the indigenous language over time. This allows the student to slowly move from what is known (understandings in their L1), to what is unknown (new ideas in their L2). This can reduce the stress associated with adopting a new language, and makes it possible for the child to build confidence in learning, familiarity with the new L2, and achievement in their learning.
Benitez (1971) investigates Spanish bilingual programs in the USA, and determines that they should reinforce, develop and increase knowledge of the mother tongue. Curriculum selection is based on the maxim that either English or Spanish is used to teach content area in an equal manner, and that no part of the curriculum be merely a translation of something else that has been taught in another language. In this way, learners will be able to see the importance placed on both languages, and more likely to valorize both languages. In addition, cultural education planning should be an integral part of every subject in order to avoid aculturism (neglect of the cultural dimension), monoculturism (neglect of one of the cultures), hyperculturism (the use of cultural identification and loyalty) and paraculturism (inappropriate use of cultural component for political, social or economic power).

Transitional programs are dependent upon the value placed upon the indigenous/immigrant cultures within the majority culture and the self-determination of the minority culture in the process of change. Without a clear vision of how minority languages fit within society it is difficult to achieve a state of balanced bilingualism (one language may be favored in certain tasks) and there is more of a possibility for individuals to not value one of the languages. Valorization will come from socialization within the community, and how much an individual has adopted the values of the different societal groups and sub groups (Hamers and Blanc, 2000).

In Drake’s program, the teachers play an important role in helping to model successful language balance. These teachers also have the linguistic and cultural understanding of the minority culture that helps them deal with student’s problems and questions. The teachers are bilingual and members of the indigenous groups, so students can see how teachers can shift between languages and how they use each language in different contexts. Nonetheless, teachers in these kinds of programs need to be conscious of using language equally and fairly across contexts, in order to develop the idea that either language can be used for any task. The problem that potentially exists in bilingual programs is that some tasks can be associated with certain languages. In my own school (Osaka YMCA International College), classes are taught in English (the minority language), but often the everyday school forms for key events are in Japanese (majority language). This may undermine the importance of using English within our school.
Bilingual programs that don’t give enough emphasis upon cognitive development may see poor achievement in minority language students. According to Skunabb-Kangas (1977 as cited in Baker, 2006) and Cummins (1976 as cited in Baker, 2006) a child needs to attain a certain level in their cognitive development in order to benefit from their bilingualism. That is, the child must be able to reach a certain level of competency to both avoid the negative consequences of bilingualism and benefit from the additive aspects associated with bilingualism (Herdina and Jessner, 2002). This phenomenon is referred to as the threshold theory, which can help to explain the reasons why children are either successful in their learning or fail to learn an L2. Children may be placed into situations that they are not ready for, because they are a certain age, or have spent a certain amount of time in the majority language situation.

Any child who is forced into a ‘sink or swim’ situation of total submersion into a L2 may be forced to use language that is at an inappropriate level for them. Competence in both languages may be insufficiently developed, or there may be age appropriate competence in one language (L1), but not the other (L2). In these kinds of situations, teaching a child in their first language may be able to increase the chances of comprehensible input. This is significant, especially when a child is at an early stage of cognitive development. Literacy transfers across languages can later assist L2 acquisition. According to Krashen (1996), good bilingual programs should provide knowledge through ‘content teaching’ in the first language. This provides literacy in the first language, building confidence and self-esteem. Individuals can be exposed to comprehensible input in their L1 and then slowly through their L2 in sheltered-language programs. Students are taught with simplified vocabulary, with purposeful materials and methods (Baker, 2000). These kinds of programs have a number of pros and cons. The major advantage is that the competencies that are built upon relate to the specific minority groups. That is, the students learn through concepts that have been achieved through their L1 and culture. On the other hand, they restrict opportunities for authentic modeling of the majority language from fellow peers, and this may stigmatize minority students, by making them stand out. Even though the minority-speaking children of immigrants may enter monolingual forms of mainstream education that give opportunities to use their L1, these programs tend to concentrate on assimilating the children into the majority language (Baker, 2006).
Also, within mainstream education, students may be placed into these special programs (versions of these forms include sheltered English/withdrawal programs, content-based ESL and segregationist) based on their individual language competencies given from various assessment tools. Once placed in these special classes, students may suffer from labeling and different treatment that may limit their opportunities for access to materials and learning that empowers them in the majority language environment.

Judging a learner’s competency in language can be difficult. Minority language student’s basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) may overshadow their cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). These students may be very good at face to face, context embedded situations where the amount of non-visual cues provide a supportive environment, but when in context reduced academic situations they may have trouble. Evaluation of the minority language student’s L2 ability based only on BICS might lead to an incorrect assessment of a learner’s actual overall ability and could lead to the erroneous placement of the student into academic situations that will disadvantage them. Baker (2006) discusses how some minority language children in the U.S.A., move from being classified as LEP (limited language proficiency) to EL (English learners) to FEP (fluent English proficient), based on their conversational language ability. Although these students are able to participate in conversations outside the classroom (or within certain contexts within the classroom), they may not be ready for the academic language that they may encounter within specific learning situations. One could imagine someone being placed in a level after conversations with teaching staff, or oral interviews, as was done at my previous language school. Yet, when it came to using other skills, such as reading or writing, the students had a lot of difficulty and tended to avoid doing activities that required them to use those productive skills. The reverse can also be true, where academic skills may be heightened; but BICS is less developed. At my present college, we have difficulties in placing students, because the proficiency tests that we use only test writing ability (CALP), but when in classes, the students interpersonal language production skills don’t match the expected outcomes of the particular level within the curriculum. Therefore, we often get students who can write very well, but cannot speak and communicate within classroom tasks. It is very important to train teachers on how to deal with students who show some disparity between their BICS and CALP proficiencies.
Within Immersion programs, learners may be seen to lag behind in not only language, but in cognitive development as well. Cummins (2006, as cited in Baker, 2006) suggests this may be only temporary, and unlikely to cause permanent detrimental effects. Immersion is based upon the idea that the learning of an L2 is similar to the learning of an L1, and that language is best learned in natural and stimulating contexts. Hamers and Blanc (2000) explain immersion programs dividing them into: Early and late. Early immersion programs are further subdivided into early total immersion, such as in St-Lambert pilot school where children acquire literacy skills first in French, and then later English is introduced, followed by a bilingual stage. Another similar program is the Culver City Bilingual program for Spanish and English. Early partial immersion is when both languages are used from the beginning, or as in the Welsh Bilingual project, half the day is taught in one language, and the other half in the second language. However, there is some evidence that this kind of program is not as successful for language development over the long term, even though academic progress is not affected. Late immersion (later exposure or drip feeding toward mid to late high school) is more focused on functional bilinguality, and not full and equal proficiency in both languages. Language exposure in this form favors the promotion of harmony and cultural awareness within community groups or intercultural excursions where language is used for everyday survival needs in another country. The major consideration with immersion programs is the effect of immersion on academic progress. According to Hammers and Blanc (2000), research has shown that immersion programs are often better than regular mainstream second language programs; they do not impede progress in academic learning, and may even favor cognitive development.

Successful bilingual programs should focus on trying to promote opportunities for all students. They should empower minority language students, and make use of the minority/herititage language and culture as a valuable resource for cognitive development and cultural understanding, for minority and majority language students. Bilingualism can be fostered in mainstream education, transitional type situations and specific immersion/mainstream bilingual education. However, additive forms of bilingual education such as immersion and mainstream bilingual education tend to be better at promoting minority language maintenance and development. Programs that favor continued cognitive and linguistic development (avoiding language attrition and individuals placing less value on language), will
promote successful learning for all students.

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References


