

# The Road to Bilingualism: Cases of Success

*La ruta al bilingüismo: casos exitosos*

*A estrada para o bilingüismo: casos de sucesso*

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**ABSTRACT.** This review presents an immersion model based on the ideas of Richard-Amato regarding task-based approach, and how it was adapted to Wiggin's *Understanding by Design* and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills frameworks. This combination has nurtured and helped the immersion model to arise, where the content and language areas are responsible for the cognitive and communicative development in a learner. The institution recognizes itself as an alternative educational solution for its students, and periodically revises its policies to meet the needs that can emerge in their community. Thus, the immersion model applied in the institution has emerged as a flexible, yet well-grounded and solid program that aims to make the most of the content in different areas to help students develop their foreign language skills in English.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism; content and language; CLIL; understanding by design; 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

**RESUMEN.** Este estudio presenta un modelo de inmersión basado en las ideas de Richard-Amato, su adaptación a *Comprensión a Través del Diseño* de Wiggin's y a los marcos de habilidades del siglo XXI. Esta combinación ha nutrido y ayudado al surgimiento de un modelo de inmersión donde las áreas de contenido y lengua son responsables del desarrollo cognitivo y comunicativo en un estudiante. La institución se reconoce a sí misma como una solución educacional alternativa para sus estudiantes y revisa periódicamente sus estrategias para satisfacer las necesidades que puedan surgir en la comunidad. Asimismo, el modelo de inmersión implementado en la institución ha surgido como un programa flexible, sólido y bien fundamentado, que aspira a aprovechar el contenido en diferentes áreas del conocimiento para ayudar a los estudiantes a desarrollar sus habilidades en inglés como lengua extranjera.

**Palabras clave:** bilingüismo; contenido y lengua; AICLE; comprensión a través del diseño; estrategias para el siglo XXI.

**RESUMO.** Esta revisão apresenta um modelo de imersão baseado nas ideias de Richard-Amato com relação à abordagem por tarefas e como ela foi adaptada ao *Understanding by Design*, de Grant Wiggins, e no âmbito das competências do século 21. Essa combinação nutriu e ajudou o modelo de imersão a expandir no lugar em que as áreas do conteúdo e da língua são responsáveis pelo desenvolvimento cognitivo e comunicativo em um estudante. A instituição se reconhece como uma solução educacional alternativa para seus estudantes e revisa periodicamente suas políticas para atender as necessidades que podem surgir em sua comunidade. Dessa forma, o modelo de imersão aplicado na instituição resulta flexível, ainda que seja um programa sólido e bem fundamentado que busca aproveitar ao máximo o conteúdo em diferentes áreas para ajudar os estudantes a desenvolverem suas competências em inglês como língua estrangeira.

**Palavras-chave:** AICL/CLIL; bilingüismo; competências do século 21; conteúdo e língua; understanding by design.

## Introduction

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The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has set numerous challenges that education tries to meet adopting practices according to the learners' needs, and this process will never stop. One of these needs is to communicate in a second language effectively, which has become critical for future world citizens. Moreover, beyond the typical assets and advantages that follow the learning of a foreign language, there have been cases, such as the one mentioned by Vazquez (1990), which established that there is a correlation between being bilingual and having a better academic performance. Consequently, these improvements became of interest even to governments. Government education policies later added bilingualism to their education priorities, including those of the Colombian government, thus creating programs to promote, develop, and reinforce bilingual education policies such as the *Colombia Bilingue* program (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2013). However, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, bilingual programs in private schools have been implemented before the activation of such programs sponsored by the government. These programs emerged as a response to a rapidly changing world that started changing and connecting distant regions, thus making communication and languages an emerging necessity that schools needed to address. Such is the case of the abovementioned institution in mention.

The school described in this article was founded in 1988, thus making it close to three decades working to provide innovative education, focused on providing an alternative educational solution for its students, while also promoting critical thinking, maintaining a global focus, and fostering solid values. Currently, the school has about 700 students from preschool to eleventh grade. A bilingual program has been set in place that takes these students to a B2/C1 level in English (Council of Europe, 2001). Nevertheless, English is understood as a foreign language in the school programs, after considering both, Colombian culture and local needs, in which the English language is not commonly seen as an immediate need or frequently used. A second language is one that is also used in everyday fields, such as education, business, or work, whereas a foreign language is one that does not naturally belong to

the local community and that is not traditionally spoken in the region (Arabski & Wojtaszek, 2011), thus enforcing the decision of taking English as a foreign language. Most learners come from privileged families with a high socio-economic status, where learners have many opportunities to be exposed to a foreign language, namely English. Students are heterogeneous in terms of learning styles and aptitudes. The school's immersion program has worked with content-based instruction (CBI), which is used to plan lessons by focusing on a subject or topic using the target language, thus learning the target language in a more natural manner than with a form-focused approach (Stryker & Leaver, 1997).

CBI was chosen due to similarities with the Understanding by Design framework—as they are holistic and global, and these characteristics merge well with the school's qualitative evaluation policy (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). The UBD framework relies on backward design (from a big complex objective to details) and program changes according to emergent needs. These changes happen as we teach. The UBD framework makes planning revolve around big ideas (the learning goals that can cover other subordinate topics, skills, understandings, and comprehensions), which will lead to specific understandings (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005; Yurtseven & Altun, 2017). While focusing on the big picture first, content-based instruction (CBI) has proven to be beneficial to the school's main framework (UBD). Another element that was adopted while planning was the 4Cs for developing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills—Creativity, Collaboration, Critical thinking, and Communication—which aim to prepare the students' integration into more complex world scenarios (National Education Association, 2014). *Understanding by Design* and educating for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills merged in the institution and are the bases of the academic ground in the school.

## Innovating Content and Language

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Innovation has been key to fortify a framework that has led this school into a general academic success. In terms of bilingualism, the policy was defined by considering different perspectives, such as the UBD, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills framework, and the CEF, which are revised every year and reconsidered in case any update is required.

The Understanding by Design framework circles around establishing defined goals as depicted by Wiggins and McTighe (2005). These goals are divided into four classes in the institution: understanding goals, ability goals, knowledge goals, and transference goals (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005a). First, the UBD introduces the *knowledge goals*, which are the core concepts that students will learn, followed by the *ability goals*, which describe the skills that will be used as proof of knowledge. The next goals are the *understanding goals*, which are what the learners will reflect and be aware of regarding the topics in the learning units. Finally, *transference goals* enclose everything. These transference goals put knowledge, skills, and understanding into practice. For example, if a transference goal has the student write a literary essay following the MLA style, then the knowledge goals would be connected to literary criticism approaches, the skills would be connected to academic writing, the use of templates, and MLA style, and the understanding goals would aim to help students learn how critiques help readers to choose their next book.

Finally, during the creation stage, some of these goals are matched to one of the 4Cs presented in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills framework. For instance, the last example would have been connected to critical thinking, as one of the 4Cs in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. These two frameworks are the basis for planning learning units at the school.

The current policy was a result of the application of existing theory that supports the framework originally intended in the institution. The main goal of the bilingual education program is to ensure that learners understand and use English adequately in different communicative and academic scenarios (considering English a domain for science, arts, culture, and work, among others).

Since the school work revolves around UBD and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, the bilingual education program became an enhancement to the frameworks used at school, taking into account the ideas for an Immersion Model by Richard-Amato (1988), where some core subjects are taught in a foreign language as a means to broaden the learner's cultural horizons, as well as to fortify language skills through academic content. As a result of the school's bilingual program, students graduate and are considered as independent users of English as a foreign language, as it was learned through the use of content adapted to their

linguistic needs. This is closely related to the core ideas of Content and Language Integrated Learning, which is an approach aimed at building academic content that will make the most of a second language to engage learning in both language and core subject learning (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). In addition to the bilingual program, students start taking a third language, French, from the ninth grade and onwards. In the French program, learners aim to approve the first level of the DELF exam, equivalent to the A1 level in the Common European Framework (NATO, 2015).

As a complement to the acquisition of foreign languages and with the goal of offering students a more diverse social and cultural experience than the one offered in the institution, the school has sought international exchange programs where students can expand their horizons, exploring possibilities to improve learners' proficiency in English. To this end, an integration program with Canada was consolidated, where participants reside in that country for approximately two months, living with a Canadian family and studying in the mainstream education system in the city. Furthermore, the school is currently working on the development of an exchange program to reinforce the learning of French language.

The immersion model adapted from Richard-Amato (1988) in the school works along the UBD and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills frameworks, making content and language areas responsible of the cognitive and communicative development in learners.

In this model, subject teachers have to consider the learners' linguistic competence before designing linguistic/cognitive materials to convey meaning appropriately, and classes will ultimately focus on meaning rather than form (Richard-Amato, 1988). Subjects such as math, science, social studies, arts, or literature are taught in English. However, bilingual education classes do not take more than 50% of the total classes in some course, this percentage varies in each course. As an example, kindergartens have 19 out of 34 hours of class (55%) a week are taught in English, whereas in the eleventh grade only 11 out of 38 hours of class (28%) are taught in English. This percentage varies depending on the evaluation of the school year's program and eventual changes in the school curricula. This flexibility in the model allows institutions to overcome potential challenges in the development and

application of the bilingual education program (Harrop, 2012). Table 1 displays the average number of hours taught in each area per week, whereas Table 2 explains how many classes are taken in English in terms of policy and real application during the term 2017–2018.

**Table 1. Subjects**

<b>Content Subject</b>	<b>No. Hours per Week (45-minute sessions)</b>
Math	5
Science	5
Social studies	3
Art	2
English and literature	5

Source: School's PEI and Bilingualism program.

**Table 2: Percentage of hours of other subjects taught in English per grade level**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Coverage</b>	
	<b>School Policy (%)</b>	<b>2017– 2018 Application (%)</b>
K	55	56
T	55	56
1st	50	62
2nd	50	63
3rd	50	63
4th	50	63
5th	50	55
6th	40	68
7th	40	68
8th	40	55
9th	13	26
10th	13	26
11th	13	28

Source: School's PEI and Bilingualism program.

As was previously stated, the percentage of classes taught in English varies depending on the students' needs and the evaluation of the school programs once the school year is over. It seems convenient to have a flexible bilingual education that prioritizes student needs over percentages, particularly if the tendency is to gradually increase the coverage of bilingual education.

Regarding evaluation, it requires teachers to be skilled in both their content areas and in English language, aside from understanding the bilingual education policy at the school and the theory behind it. As a result of this need, 80% of the teachers in the school speak English, even though the majority of the teaching staff is Colombian. Foreign teachers (5%) work primarily in content areas such as math or science; one of the foreign teachers is in charge of kindergarten. A good content and language teacher always strive to improve their command over their areas of expertise and the target language (Masrizal, 2013), which is the philosophy of the institution, where teacher expertise and experience are more important than the nationality of the staff members. Science and math teachers, who are part of the staff, are especially fluent in English, and they are able to teach the class with ease. Moreover, the staff holds periodical meetings and training sessions to ensure that the team is working according to the principles used in the bilingual education program of the school.

The implementation of the model also needs reliable and authentic resources to engage students and to address the content and linguistic elements intended for their learning. Because of this, the idea of obtaining a basic curriculum and materials from a native English country was dismissed, as they are not entirely suitable for non-native speakers. Therefore, the school gathers and selects resources which can be used for planning and teaching. These materials are not implemented directly; instead, the materials used are adapted or created to meet the learners' needs. Apart from the printed and created materials, technology-mediated resources and materials have become a great asset to obtain authentic material, which has increased the learning options of the students (Khalid, Sutoyo, Mungad, Sari, & Herawan, 2014).

All in all, this bilingual education program has been implemented and used to address the linguistic and content needs of the students



throughout their learning process in the institution. In addition, the school ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in the 2017 Saber 11 tests, with an overall mark of 90,57 (Dinero, 2017). Moreover, 11<sup>th</sup> grade students who have taken the IELTS have certified a B2 and C1 in competence level. These results make the institution a case for a successful bilingual experience. As they are constantly looking to improve the programs, the school will engage in comparing the current model and policies with more updated theory or approaches, including CLIL. The CLIL approach has a plethora of models described by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010). Each model can be furtherly adapted to meet the needs of an institution.

The model, in practice, has similarities with the A3 model for primary school. The A3 model is usually based on an interdisciplinary approach that will establish the foundation for an extensive program, and it requires the team of teachers to work together to address the content and linguistic needs that will prepare students for academic success (Coyle et al., 2010). On the other hand, secondary and high schools are close to a B2 model. The B2 model in CLIL encloses bilingual education models where students develop their linguistic and content processes focusing on proficiency. Moreover, they participate in international testing, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) (Coyle et al., 2010). It should be noted that the school shares elements with CLIL models. These shared elements have emerged due to the school's main framework, the UBD. Shared elements between approaches can reveal another strength of successful programs, in that they are not focused on a single approach, but instead, they are willing to adapt and integrate the practices and ideas that can undertake the learning necessities of its community.

## Conclusion

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The institution has a successful immersion model that makes the most of the work of Richard-Amato. This provides a well-grounded and solid background to the program that aims to take advantage of the content in different areas in order to help students develop their foreign language skills in English. On the other hand, the school has the UBD and

the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills framework, which have shared elements such as backwards design, focusing on developing collaboration, creativity, communication, critical thinking, and program revision and evaluation (National Education Association, 2014) among others have allowed the model to become flexible to adapt and respond to emergent learner needs, making this adaptability another advantage that programs should adopt. Programs can have different incarnations throughout theory, but fixed formulas would fail to address precisely the needs in terms of knowledge and skills. This institution chose a model that would not have been effective on its own. Its effectiveness lies on the synergy of the Richard-Amato's immersion model adaptation, as well as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills and Wiggin's Understanding by Design frameworks, and the willingness of the educative community to revise and change the program to properly address the ever-changing needs that emerge nowadays in education.

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