

Primary Language Support in an Era of Educational Reform

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Educational policy must shift away from old, unworkable and hegemonic ideologies that held Spanish-speaking children to be deficient because they didn't speak English, to new theory and practice that accept their home language as an asset. (Halcón, 2001, p. 76)

Second language learners continue to languish in California public schools in spite of six years of promises following passage of the controversial ballot initiative *English for the Children* (Proposition 227) to fix the education of English Language Learners (ELLs) through English-only instruction. The unrealistic expectation established by supporters of the proposition that students possessing a heritage language could learn English in one year in segregated settings and succeed academically soon thereafter is largely unfulfilled as scores of second language learners are experiencing an irrelevant curriculum devoid of the “funds of knowledge” that children bring into the classroom.

Recently, in California, with the development of new standards for teacher preparation programs following the Senate Bill 2042 legislation, it is likely that the curriculum and instructional practices for heritage language students will become even more disconnected from the lived

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experiences of second language learners as teacher preparation is standardized and more connected with high stakes testing programs (Brock, Parks, & Moore, 2004).

As noted by Lea (2003), SB2042 has serious omissions if we are to prepare teachers for culturally responsive pedagogy that is aligned with the critical multicultural and anti-racist curriculum needed in a state as diverse as California. In their reductionist wisdom, policymakers replaced the Cross-cultural, Language, and Academic Development (CLAD) credential authorization with the lesser "Authorization to Teach English Learners," thereby degrading previous efforts to provide heritage language students a comprehensive program of instruction that meets their social, cultural, and academic needs. The new authorization under SB2042 essentially removed the spirit and heart of teaching heritage language students through the mandate of a one-size-fits all, standards-based, mechanical instructional practice.

This new authorization amounts to legalizing intellectual robbery as teacher educators, especially those committed to social justice and democracy, are regulated to follow the party line and suspend professional judgment or face the consequences. By omitting biliteracy and primary language support as a standard, state politicians and policymakers are sending a strong message about who has access and who can succeed. As educators, it is incumbent upon us to turn back the tide of standardization and failure toward providing a more just and caring educational experience for those students who come to us speaking a heritage language.

For those who view Proposition 227 as an attack on culturally responsive pedagogy, the new authorization adds insult to injury as teacher educators are commanded to prepare candidates to use an English-only approach when addressing the academic needs of heritage language students. This hegemonic, English-only, homogenized curriculum that is being propagated under the new authorization is in direct opposition to what is known to be effective instructional practices to help heritage language students have access to the core curriculum, develop a strong knowledge base, and understand complex content (Ahlquist, 2003; Brock et al., 2004; Cummins, 1996; Krashen, 1981).

Local efforts to implement effective programs for English Language Learners in California since the passage of Proposition 227 have often been obscured by the politicization of educational issues, which are driven by dramatic economic, social, and political forces (Ahlquist, 2003; Gitlin, Buendía, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003). Rather than rely on the pedagogy of effective practices, policymakers and practitioners often find themselves responding to the ever-changing, fast-paced, bandwagons of educational reform driven by narrowly-defined political agendas, external

demands, and legalistic requirements that frequently mire school personnel in paper work, documentation, assessments, and accountability charades.

Under these circumstances, unfortunately, it is very difficult for educators to engage in thoughtful pedagogical dialogue about successful programs for ELLs in mainstream settings. In the new standardization climate in which compliance and conformity are the norms, flexibility is frowned upon, critical thinking is strongly discouraged, and educators often find themselves facilitating a pernicious cycle of failure that has plagued heritage language students in American schools (Brock et al., 2004; Necochea & Cline, 1993; Halcón, 2001; Reyes, 2001). New teachers, who are focused on obtaining tenure and satisfying their administrators and district personnel, are particularly vulnerable to the current reform pressures based on the standards and accountability movement.

The call for English-only instruction can have dramatic negative effects for children as schools continue the practice of eradicating the language and culture of the home. Indeed, it is inconceivable that children who are not allowed, encouraged, or enabled to include the essence of their identity in the educational process will be successful within our schools. It is essential that all English-only programs include a strong primary language support (PLS) component, thus facilitating the acquisition of English literacy skills, the development of academic language, and the acceptance of differences. However, in the current climate of school reform toward standardization and a "one-size-fits-all approach," it is unlikely that educators will engage in dynamic debates regarding the merits of dual immersion and maintenance programs, second language instruction, and bilingual education (Ahlquist, 2003; Calderón & Carreón, 2000; Halcón, 2001).

The era of standards-driven schooling must be resisted by all educators and concerned citizens and replaced by a democracy-driven educational reform that emphasizes American ideals of fairness, justice, and equity for diverse students. It is especially important that teacher educators form the first line of resistance due to the important role they play as gatekeepers of knowledge, critics of educational policies, and protectors of academic freedom, lest the top-down reform agenda further erode profound social justice issues related to race, ethnicity, class, language, and gender (Gibson, 2003; Wakefield, 2003).

The recent school reform agenda driven by Proposition 227 and SB2042 has resulted in a dramatic increase in placing heritage language students in mainstream classrooms with English-only teachers. This shift has necessitated a reconceptualization of the approaches utilized in meeting the academic and social needs of second language learners. It is

important for mainstream educators to initiate drastic changes which include a strong primary language support component. Additionally, in an SB2042 environment, preparation programs must take a leading role in instructing teachers and helping districts design and implement appropriate curriculum for heritage language learners to include a primary language support component.

Reconceptualizing the Conversation

Although the political controversy surrounding the use of the primary language of second language learners is intense and often irrational, effective programs must have multiple ways to incorporate the language and culture of diverse students to ensure social justice and equity within a democratic educational system. The inextricable linkage between language and spirit, language and humanity, and language and culture are so strong that taking away one's language is tantamount to taking away one's soul. As stated so eloquently by Gloria Anzaldúa (1990, p. 207):

If you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity-I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself ... as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

The importance of a strong, effective, and resourceful primary language support (PLS) program cannot be overstated for the profound positive impact on schooling and learning that can be achieved when the primary language is addressed. Indeed, the success or failure of heritage language learners in mainstream settings may well be partially determined by the strength of the PLS component and how adept teachers are at integrating the primary language for facilitating academic success. Research has documented the academic and social advantages of the primary language in English-only settings because it facilitates the learning process, reduces frustration, increases comprehension, deepens the understanding of complex concepts, promotes the acceptance of diverse students, and builds group cohesiveness (Cline & Necochea, 2003; Necochea & Cline, 1993; Tikunoff, Ward, van Broekhuizen, Romero, Casteneda, Lucas, & Katz, 1991).

In their landmark studies on exemplary Special Alternative Instructional Programs (SAIP), Tikunoff et al. (1991) documented the extensive use of the primary language and culture in successful English-only programs. The SAIP studies show that even in English-only settings with monolingual teachers, students are allowed to process information,

discuss concepts, and read books and write assignments in their primary language. Evidently, many effective English-only teachers find creative ways to help students understand key concepts by incorporating a variety of primary language strategies that facilitate comprehension. In one of their conclusions, Tikunoff et al. (1991) stated that at times there appears to be little difference between bilingual and exemplary English-only SAIP classrooms in the role of the primary language.

Although incorporating the primary language seems counterintuitive to many teachers and is not encouraged in the new California credentialing legislation, once the initial reluctance is bridged educators find PLS to be a very powerful strategy for providing comprehensible input, understanding of abstract concepts, and equal access to the core curriculum. Additionally, incorporating students' home language promotes formation of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) because students are better able to gain a deeper understanding of concepts, which can then transfer to academic learning and understanding (Cummins, 1981; Krashen, 1981).

In effective English-only programs, the primary language is used on a regular basis to provide access to abstract concepts by employing a variety of instructional practices. It is imperative that preparation programs stress the importance of using the students' home language in a supportive role to clarify concepts, develop academic proficiency, and facilitate content acquisition even when teachers do not speak the students' primary language. Becoming adept at finding creative ways of embracing the mother tongue into classroom practices, effective PLS teachers use a variety of strategies, techniques, and resources in infusing the students' primary language and allowing students to achieve at their highest academic potential. Teacher educators must help schools modify instructional practices in order to help heritage language learners understand the core curriculum and facilitate academic success.

Modifications of instructional practices to include a PLS component can take many different forms and are limited only by the creativity and willingness to experiment on the part of the classroom teacher. However, success in this endeavor will only occur with teachers who have ample resources and materials, training opportunities, and a climate supportive of their change efforts. It is important that colleges and schools of education guide teachers and collaborate closely with strong instructional leaders to implement sound pedagogy grounded in theory and frequently evaluated for effectiveness.

The literature reports a wide variety of instructional strategies and techniques that form a strong PLS component in English-only programs (Cline & Necochea, 2002, Tikunoff et al., 1991). Although not exhaustive,

the following can be considered a partial list that can help educators begin to emphasize effective instructional practices for heritage language learners within mainstream settings: (1) parental support, (2) cross-aged and peer tutoring, (3) primary language cooperative learning groups, (4) computer and multimedia technology, (5) bilingual paraprofessionals, (6) integrated primary language activities, and (7) status of the language. These seven components are interconnected and interrelated in a comprehensive whole where each variable supports all the others, thus enhancing the learning experience for students.

Parental Support

When developing a PLS component in an English-only setting, parents can provide invaluable assistance in helping to make instruction comprehensible for heritage language students (Cline & Necochea, 2003). Using parents for lesson previews, clarification, and conceptual development can provide a powerful bridge when a teacher is trying to help students understand abstract concepts. For example, teachers can send a lesson home a couple of weeks before it will be conducted in class and ask the parents to help their children understand the concepts in their primary language. Parents can help clarify abstract ideas, especially when the curriculum calls for familiar cultural artifacts. When teaching abstract concepts, like respect, parents can be asked to help the students understand the ideas through the use of authentic cultural artifacts, such as family stories, myths, and legends. The potential for parental support in conceptual development is endless, particularly when teachers become adept at using the strengths of the family to enhance their curriculum.

This notion of parental involvement is very different from what is typically expected in schools, such as PTA membership, serving on the School Site Council, attending school functions, participating in bake sales, and fund-raising. Many parents of language minority students find these traditional school activities to be irrelevant, intimidating, foreign, exclusionary, and otherwise uncomfortable. When asked to truly participate in a culturally relevant and meaningful fashion, parents invariably will rise to the occasion (Cline 2001, 2002).

A caveat is in order on this point, since some parents may have more resources and abilities to help their children than others. It is important for teachers to understand the communities and the families of their students and to ask parents to help in ways that they can be successful and will enhance the educational experience for students. If parents are over worked, stressed out, or not able to help, the teacher needs to adopt a slightly different strategy to assist children to be successful. Therefore,

lack of parental involvement should not become an excuse for student failure. Teachers need to avoid falling into the trap of blaming the victim if the parents do not have the ability to help their children be successful within an educational setting.

Cross-Age and Peer Tutoring

The benefits of tutoring in a PLS component are many, including raising students' self-esteem, enhancing basic skills, and improving the climate of the classroom as students learn from each other. In cross-age tutoring, older students work with younger students on academic activities, such as reading, writing, and math in the primary language. In this situation, older students who have become proficient in both languages are able to serve as role models and build cultural and academic bridges for the younger students who are in the process of acquiring a second language.

Peer tutors are usually students in the same class who have become proficient in both languages and are called upon to help their peers with instructions, directions, and deeper understandings. While helping the teacher explain abstract concepts in the primary language, peer tutors often become language brokers in the classroom, ideally situated to provide PLS because of their special ability to navigate both worlds. Due to their unique role in the classroom, these students are able to enhance their own basic skills as they learn information in depth in order to become the teacher for another student in the classroom. For students still acquiring English, it is advantageous to have someone in class explain concepts, instructions, and lessons in their primary language to facilitate access to the core curriculum.

Sensitivity and skill on the part of the teacher are necessary to prevent the tutoring arrangements from becoming a chore or an embarrassment to the students involved. Rather, all types of tutoring opportunities conducted for a wide variety of reasons should become part of the regular routines and interactions in the classroom. Thus, no special and potentially negative attention would be given to students who are in the process of acquiring a second language.

Primary Language Cooperative Learning Groups

Another way to incorporate PLS in the classroom is to use cooperative learning groups and allow students to speak in the language they are most comfortable with. This is an especially effective technique when there are multiple languages in the classroom and the teacher is introducing new material or reviewing concepts for a test. The use of

primary language cooperative learning groups will enable students to form close ties, help each other master difficult concepts, and build vocabulary in both languages, especially when bilingualism is valued in the classroom (Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, Ivoery, & Slavin, 1997; Slavin & Cheung, 2003).

Although bilingualism and biliteracy have not become a state standard under the current reform agenda, visionary educators, concerned parents, and caring teachers often see the importance of graduating bicultural/biliterate students for the transnational economy of the 21st century. Therefore, teacher educators can help schools create strong norms of bilingualism and biliteracy for avant-garde classrooms of the future. For the forward thinking teacher, biliteracy can become a standard within the classroom that is graded and has an appropriate scope and sequence, thereby giving students credit for mastering this important skill. Parents can become natural allies in the quest for biliteracy programs since they want what is best for their children, especially when the advantages of effective biliteracy program are well understood in the global economy. Two-way immersion programs with the explicit goal of biliteracy for all, for example, often have the most active and passionate support from parents (Calderón & Carreón, 2000).

It is also very important that cooperative learning groups are fluid, giving students frequent opportunities to become part of different configurations. ELLs need to be members of mixed grouping arrangements for the purpose of interacting with peers in the second language. In this manner, cooperative learning groups can be used for both PLS as well as second language acquisition to maximize learning in mainstream classrooms. It is not acceptable to have students in a primary language group all year for all activities, because this type of tracking defeats the purpose of cooperative learning groups when the only peer models are other second language learners. Ideally, students need to be in mixed groups when practicing English skills and primary language groups when learning new concepts. The segregation that often occurs for heritage language students in an effort to comply with state standards is undesirable even within the classroom, for it deprives ELLs of peer English models and mainstream activities.

Computer and Multimedia Technology

With the advent of modern technology it has never been easier to customize education to meet the individual needs of diverse students, due to the versatility and power of computers, the internet, and various software packages. Teachers now have easy access to primary language

sources, varied cultural artifacts, and ESL programs that can help develop instructional practices to meet the needs of all students, regardless of their primary language.

Customizing education implies that every student can be at different levels and engaged in meaningful and relevant curriculum at the same time. The primary language can be used for conceptual and vocabulary development in subjects such as science, math, literature, and social studies. Schools, students, and communities will also have the opportunity of building and developing programs that will allow for the maintenance of the primary language as students acquire English. Ultimately, the goal should be to help all students become proficient biliterates in English and a second language. The absence of a state standard for proficient biliteracy notwithstanding, schools and communities must have a vision beyond the current norm if students are to be prepared for the transnational global economy of the 21st century

The potential of the technology that already exists for biliteracy programs has not yet been fully explored, unfortunately, with many poor and inner city schools lacking the hardware and software to provide high quality computer assisted instruction. Although there is no social justice and equity standard, it is axiomatic that schools in poverty environments with a high percentage of ELLs have the same technology resources as those in wealthy settings. Additionally, this technology needs to be value added, not just electronic “drill and kill” activities, by incorporating relevant primary language and cultural artifacts as part of the core curriculum.

Bilingual Paraprofessionals

Using paraprofessionals in a PLS component can be an effective way of making instruction comprehensible and providing access to the core curriculum. Bilingual paraprofessionals tend to have strong ties to the communities they serve, understand the needs of ELLs, and can serve as bridges to mainstream instruction. Indeed, bilingual paraprofessionals have been invaluable in many communities as translators, builders of cultural ties, and role models for the students. In many settings where ELLs have been placed in mainstream classrooms, their only source of PLS has been the bilingual paraprofessionals who help make content and instruction comprehensible.

Mainstream teachers need to understand that the most effective use of bilingual paraprofessionals is for primary language support and not for English language acquisition instruction. Bilingual paraprofessionals are often asked not to use the primary language in the classroom and to limit

their interactions with the students to English-only under the unfortunate misunderstanding that if the students are spoken to in their primary language it will delay English acquisition. In reality, the students will acquire English concepts quicker and with more ease if they are able to have a preview/review lesson in their mother tongue, hear the concept explained in a language they can readily understand, and/or can ask questions in their own language (Cummins, 1981; Krashen, 1981; Rueda, Monzó, & Higareda, 2004). Bilingual paraprofessionals can become rather ineffective, and perhaps even counter productive, when there is a prohibition against the use of the primary language in school settings. It is essential that bilingual paraprofessionals are used to provide conceptual development and access to the core curriculum and not be put in the role of English instructor.

However, a caution is in order here for the use of paraprofessionals has also been problematic in cases where they are asked to deliver content they are not qualified to teach or are placed with teachers who have not had training in first and second language acquisition. Mainstream teachers who do not understand the role of the primary language in English-only settings can inappropriately use bilingual instructional assistants by asking them to teach content rather than provide support for access to the core curriculum. For example, bilingual instructional assistants are often asked to provide content instruction, such as science, without appropriate training or qualifications.

Perhaps the most effective setting for bilingual paraprofessionals are those that facilitate a career ladder into teaching by developing collaborative programs with universities, obtaining grant money and financial aide, forming supportive cohort groups, offering courses closer to home, and creating flexible work schedules. The benefits of having an effective career ladder program are many and include role models for the students, deep cultural understandings, and teachers who are likely to stay in the community when their credentials are completed. Bilingual paraprofessionals are one of the most important untapped resources within the school community, especially when they become integral members of the educational enterprise (Rueda, Monzó, & Higareda, 2004).

Integrated Primary Language Activities

Mainstream teachers need to include the primary language in as many regular classroom activities as possible, thereby providing heritage language students with multiple channels of understanding as they actively participate in classroom routines and become biliterate. In this manner, ELLs can become integral members in mainstream classrooms

as they collaborate with other students to complete assignments in more than one language. Additionally, for those ELLs who are not yet proficient in English, the use of their primary language in integrated assignments will allow them to comprehend key concepts and therefore be more engaged in classroom activities (Slavin & Cheung, 2003).

Effective mainstream programs can utilize the primary language in student presentations, journal writing, written assignments, content readings, as well as literature, music and songs. For example, a fifth grade presentation by students on the American Revolution can be conducted in English, Spanish and Hmong. When deciding on the different topics that are going to be covered, the students will need to collaborate and choose the visuals and graphs that would highlight the points they are going to be making to the class.

As teachers become more skilled in developing primary language activities as the norm within the classroom, they will be guided by student needs to create and implement more effective ways of integrating the primary language into core curriculum activities. Additionally, if mainstream teachers are expected to provide a quality PLS component in their classrooms, it is important that staff development activities are accompanied by appropriate materials and technology to implement the suggested strategies. A materials-rich classroom is essential for mainstream teachers to be able to create learning environments that provide ELLs with increased access to the core curriculum. Anything less will not meet high standards for democratic schooling.

Raising the Status of the Language

Lastly, teachers need to proactively raise the status of minority languages within mainstream classrooms and schools to help all students and parents see the value of biliteracy. In many schools, speaking a second language is not seen as an asset but as a problem to be fixed, a liability to be avoided at all costs lest the students be scorned and ostracized. Even though none of the standards address status of the language, it is imperative that language and culture be valued and honored within the school and classroom setting to increase the likelihood of student success. In too many California schools, especially after the passage of Proposition 227, ELLs have been made to feel ashamed of speaking a second language and their identity has become invisible within the school environment. This invisible identity appears to be creating an existential crisis for students whose cultural and linguistic presence is largely absent from the school community (Anzaldúa, 1990; Cummins, 1996)

Educators can make a lasting difference in the classroom by proactively raising the status of the language and valuing biliteracy in their schools and communities. For example, incorporating culturally authentic literature, artifacts, and historical figures into the core curriculum, having students share their personal cultural stories in the classroom—such as family histories, legends, folktales, folklore, and myths—and presenting multiple perspectives on important historical events (e.g., the discovery of America). Additionally, as the teacher values the various languages spoken in class and gives students credit for their growing biliteracy, the students begin to feel a sense of belonging and cultural compatibility. In these classrooms and schools, speaking two languages will be viewed as a tremendous asset to be recognized publicly in the school community.

As stated earlier, the status of minority languages has a profound impact on the success of ELLs in mainstream settings. However, raising the status of the language within a school cannot be an isolated event in a classroom but should be part of a systemic effort that includes as many facets of the school community as possible.

Conclusion

The new authorization to teach ELLs contained in SB2042 legislation is conspicuously silent on the role of primary language support and biliteracy in California's classrooms. It is incumbent upon educators to take back the reins of public schooling and reinforce the role of the primary language, especially in mainstream English-only classrooms, if a significant impact is going to be made on the achievement levels of ELLs. In this political environment fraught with strong anti-immigrant sentiments, quick-fixes, standardization, and education politicians who want to leave their mark before leaving office, as expressed in Propositions 227 and 187, educators at times must become subversive if public schools are to comply with the American ideal of social justice and equity for everyone (Wakefield, 2003).

Indeed, all substantive social changes happen twice, once in the minds and hearts of reformers and later as social policy. Few important social or educational changes in pursuit of justice and equity have occurred without significant and prolonged struggles, particularly when the accepted social status perceives a challenge. Like social or educational reformers of the past, educators face the same dilemmas and conflicts that often threaten their welfare and reputation with organizational alienation, truncated opportunities, and even employment termination, particularly when their actions are viewed as an affront to the social status.

It is unconscionable to legally mandate for heritage language students to be in English-only instruction, subjected to high-stakes testing, and held accountable to an irrelevant curriculum without the support necessary for success. For supporters of social justice and equity in public schooling, the high-stakes testing of heritage language students is often considered educational malpractice. Therefore, as strong advocates of heritage language students, educators must implement the changes in their own classrooms before the substantial educational reform they seek can possibly become a reality.

However, a caveat is in order here. Since many districts are bound by the rules of standards and standardization, it is imperative that new teachers be aware of the dichotomy between following the school guidelines and providing educational opportunities that promote equity for heritage language students. It is important that teachers adhere to the rules they need to conform to, but also be aware of what will truly be effective for second language learners. Individual teachers cannot do this on their own or they are likely to face dire consequences. Union leadership and teacher leaders need to take a stance on behalf of heritage language students to ensure that the educational experience does not do more harm than good. These are treacherous waters that educational reformers need to navigate if they are to make a significant impact on behalf of ELLs.

It should be noted that an effective PLS component is difficult to implement, takes time, and requires a sustained effort by a critical mass of supporters. It is not enough to just translate a few vocabulary words every now and then; educators need to make assignments relevant, meaningful, and culturally significant. Additionally, cultural connections and creating bridges with the second language community must become part of the organizational fabric of the school system.

The modifications to instructional practices to incorporate PLS needs to be comprehensive, extensive, and supported with adequate resources and materials. Colleges and schools of education must be active participants in helping teachers and schools create an inclusive curriculum that incorporates PLS, with an eventual goal of biliteracy for all students. To achieve biliteracy on a grand scale, California must abandon its contradictory stance of welcoming-unwelcoming immigrants into public schools, and embrace their diverse cultures and languages while viewing biliteracy as a tremendous asset that will benefit everyone. The current global economy and the transnational world of the 21st century require nothing less of public schooling (Gitlin et al., 2003).

As teachers embark on this journey, they need to be aware that, although there is some information supported by research of the effec-

tiveness of PLS, in many cases they will be generators of effective practices with their colleagues by employing a “can do” attitude unfettered by the standards and high-stakes testing mania. After participating in comprehensive long-term staff development, teachers will likely have the theoretical foundation and knowledge base necessary to experiment and modify curriculum. The search by educators for ways to fully include heritage language students in mainstream settings will lead to the invention and creation of instructional practices that are unique and particular to local circumstances and be truly effective for those learning English within our borders.

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