

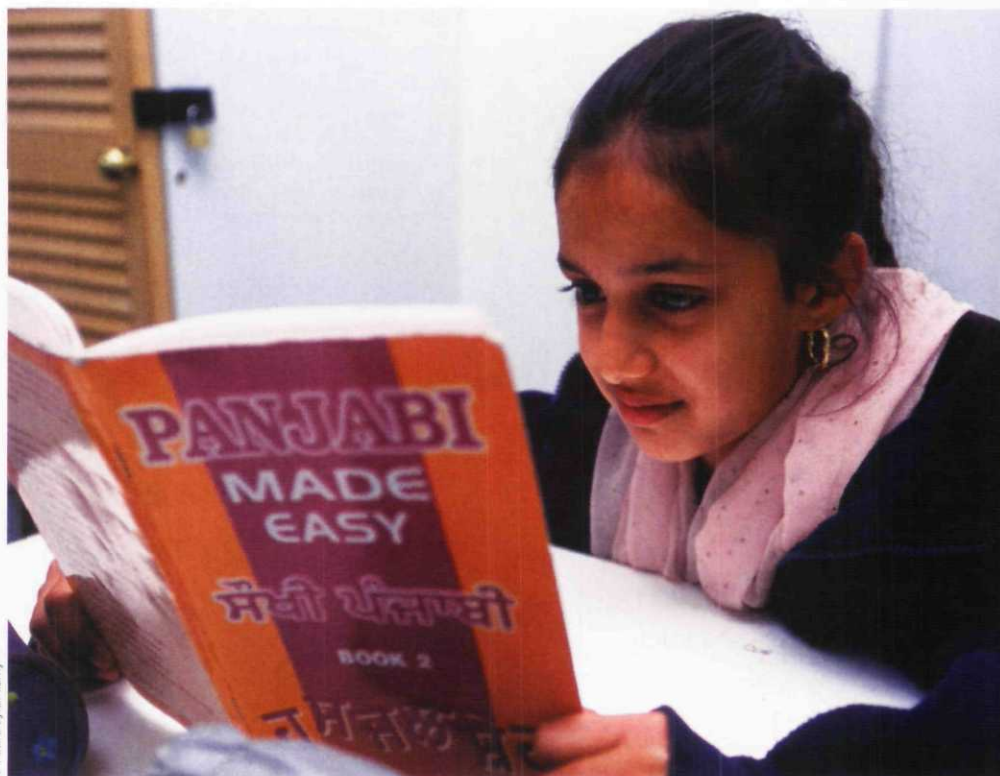
The Balancing Act of Bilingual Immersion

Learners more easily become bilingual when they connect each language to a separate context.

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As a young girl in Hyderabad, India, I could comprehend, speak, read, and write in five different languages: Hindi, the national language of India; Urdu, the language of my Persian ancestors; Telegu, the regional language; Arabic, the language of my religion; and English, the language of my schooling. My family emigrated to Chicago when I was 7 years old. There I mastered Spanish, the language of my newfound immigrant friends and neighbors. Unfortunately, along the way I lost my Telegu because I was no longer surrounded by the local Hyderabad streets and shops, where my family bought food and clothes. And maintaining Hindi, Urdu, and Arabic has been difficult for me as I have become more and more immersed in English, the language of my academic surroundings.

Yet when my graduate students ask me how I remain familiar with both the languages of my homeland and the languages of my new host country, the answer comes easily: The ability to switch smoothly from one language to another is based on a distinct change in context, person, and time. Children as young as 5 are able to master multiple languages because they are prompted to use a different language by such contextual factors as their physical location, the time of the day, and the person with whom they are speaking.



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Connecting language to a life context is a key factor in successful language education. In the United States, programs that immerse students in one language for a period of time and then accompany the switch to a second language with clear differences in context—such as the day of the week or the academic content being studied—have been the most successful in terms of long-term language proficiency gains.

Language Borders

Successful bilingual education models separate the two languages involved into distinct systems rather than use the languages intermittently throughout daily classroom instruction (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). Dual language immersion programs, increasingly popular in the United States, bring together native English-speaking students and English language learners—often Spanish-speaking students. I use examples from



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English/Spanish programs here, but dual immersion programs exist in the United States in English/Chinese, English/French, and other combinations. The dual immersion model immerses students equally in both languages and generally uses both languages in all curriculum areas.

Research shows that both majority and minority language students in such programs score high on standardized language tests in both languages and outperform their monolingual peers academically by the time they reach 5th grade (Collier, 1994; Gándara & Merino, 1993). Comparing monolingual students and students in dual language programs, Collier concluded that learning a second language does not interfere with acquiring subject-area knowledge or with maintaining one's first language.

Teachers try hard to separate the two language systems as much as possible in the dual immersion classroom so that students—and teachers—do not mix words from one language with words from the other. Some language education researchers believe that each language has its own unified set of speech sounds, and that the separate

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speech sound systems of languages should never mix if language learners are to acquire an authentic grasp of each language. Languages can become entangled through *code switching*—in which the pronunciation, grammar and syntax, or spelling of the two languages are mixed intermittently—or through *consecutive translation*, in which text is translated word-for-word from one language to another (Baker, 1993; Berthold, Mangubhai, & Batorowicz, 1997). Examples of English-Spanish language interference include mispronouncing English words on the basis of

the Spanish sound system (such as pronouncing *very* as *berry*) or inserting words from one language into a phrase made up of words from (and constructed according to the conventions of) the other language, as in the “Spanglish” phrase, “You’ve got a nasty *mancha* [stain] on your *camiseta* [shirt].”

Believers in the dual immersion philosophy think that students will not become competent in either language if they slide into such hybrid language practices as code switching and consecutive translation.

Maintaining Language Separation

Teachers of dual immersion students encourage and

expect those they teach to speak only in Spanish during a Spanish lesson and only in English during an English lesson. According to Donna Christian of the Center for Applied Linguistics (1994), there are three main ways of dividing instruction between the two languages. These are:

- *Division by time.* The instruction of each language can occur during half-day, alternate-day, or alternate-week intervals. For example, if Monday is a Spanish-speaking day, then Tuesday is an English-speaking day; or afternoon instruction takes place in Spanish and morning instruction in English.

- *Division by content.* In this format, the content area determines which language the class speaks and studies in; for example, the teacher uses Spanish solely to teach math, social studies, and science and uses English solely to teach literacy.

- *Division by staff.* Two teachers—one fluent in the minority language and the other fluent in the majority language—team teach the dual immersion classroom; students do classwork in the language spoken by the teacher who is leading the class at a given time.

This separation of languages is applied more strictly to the dual immersion teacher's speech than to students' early language learning attempts. Dual immersion teachers usually accept whatever language the student chooses to use in his or her responses, especially in the early grades. When the student does not answer in the language being used at that particular time, the teacher paraphrases what the student has said, but says it in the language of instruction for that day or time. If a dual immersion student answers a teacher in English during a Spanish lesson, for example,

understand the Spanish instruction on fractions can get help from their Spanish-dominant peers—or catch up on concepts when instruction continues in English.

Many teachers make two copies (one in each language) of classroom organizing materials, such as morning agendas, homework assignments, and chore lists. A sign hanging on the door reminds students which language each school day is set to begin with: "Today we speak in English" or "*Hablamos en Español hoy.*" When dual immersion students walk into the classroom in the

The Language Independence Model

The fixed separation of the two languages in the dual immersion model is based in psycholinguistic research conducted within the last two decades, which finds that students must clearly distinguish between the two languages cognitively so they can place each language on equal footing as they learn to listen, speak, and write in both (Nicol, 2000). This language independence model, which Cummins (1981) refers to as the "separate, underlying proficiency model," proposes that to develop bilingual academic proficiency, teachers must create clear, separate, and meaning-enriched contexts for each language during instructional time. Bilingual children learn the two (or more) languages with distinct, autonomous representational systems for each language, systems that do not interfere with each other. According to this view, there is no qualitative difference between a bilingual child's and a monolingual child's acquisition of language.

According to Romaine (1989), as young children acquire one or more languages, they separate them cognitively by having distinct contexts for each language, such as knowing when to speak in which language with which parent. Children who learn languages at different times—for example, children who learn one language from birth and one language later in life—also separate the two languages on the basis of context. Two languages may also be represented differently according to the order in which the child learned them.

Grosjean (1982) believes young bilingual children go through successive stages in the language acquisition process. The child in the first stage of learning several languages has only one lexical system made up of words mixed together from both languages. In the second stage, the child's brain begins to develop two distinct lexical systems—for pragmatic reasons—and the child separates words according to the language from which the words come, even though the syntactical and grammatical structure remains the same for both languages. Finally, in the last stage,

Teachers must encourage students in bilingual programs to become equally proficient in both languages.

the teacher should paraphrase in Spanish what the student said (Torres-Guzman, Morales, Han, Kelyn, & Maldonado, 2004).

Setting Up the Classroom

The separation of the languages being studied should be represented in the scheduling, physical layout, and materials of the classroom. Teachers in bilingual immersion programs must decide how the two languages will be distributed across the curriculum and in the classroom itself.

Alternating between the languages, while giving substantial time to each, is often a good way to go. For instance, the teacher may conduct a lesson on fractions in English on Monday and then continue the lesson in Spanish on Tuesday. The focus of the lesson might change from one day to another; for instance, students might learn equivalent fractions in English one day, and then work with improper fractions in Spanish the next day. The overall goal is for students to develop a broader understanding of fractions in both languages, without wasting time translating information from one language to the other. English-dominant students struggling to

morning, they see an agenda posted on the wall in either Spanish or English, and they carry out their usual morning ritual—such as reviewing the previous day's lesson notes or sharing answers from last week's homework in groups—in the appropriate language.

All materials and supplies in a dual immersion classroom are labeled in both languages. Books, model student papers, or vocabulary lists in each language are physically separated but kept not too far from each other. The teacher tries to maintain parity, by including one shelf of books in Spanish for every shelf of books in English, or one English and one Spanish bulletin board, for instance.

Research on Language Spatialization

Exactly how two languages are stored and represented in the brain of a bilingual person is still something of a mystery. Researchers disagree as to whether or not different languages are stored in separate parts of the brain and whether they operate independently or interdependently as a bilingual person produces language (Pinker, 1994).



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always mediation and transfer between the two interdependent languages and that a high level of abstract cognitive processing operates as information is transmitted between languages.

Research studies have also found that as bilingual learners gain a greater vocabulary in the second language, the degree of concept mediation between the languages increases and the level of lexical mediation decreases (Kroll & Tokowicz, 2001). If an English-dominant student learning Spanish sees the Spanish word *arbol*, for example, that student is likely to access the corresponding English word *tree* within her or his mind; this cognitive process would strengthen the conceptual processing of

tree/arbol as a unified sign symbolizing the same object—in other words, lexical mediation. As this native English-speaking student's proficiency in Spanish increases, however, the student becomes less dependent on the lexical mediation between the first and second language as the concept of a *tree/arbol*—a tall plant with certain characteristics—grounds itself in both languages with no need for instant translation.

Some researchers believe that even if the cognitive system maintains separation among the languages within the brain, the system does allow for a free and fluid interchange between the two languages so that both languages are always active and open to surface-level cues from the classroom environment (Palij & Homel, 1987). These environmental cues, such as classroom agenda, language signs on the door, or day of the week, then determine language choice. According to Palij and Homel, both languages influence linguistic performance, even when the bilingual speaker is using only one language at that moment. This view holds that a bilingual person has access to control mechanisms within the brain that allow

the child uses linguistic strategies in speech to separate both the syntax and lexicon for the two different languages.

Eventually, children become aware of language choice and are able to fully separate the two systems. For children learning more than one language from birth, the functional autonomy of two or more language systems emerges between the ages of 3 and 5, linguists believe (Hakuta, 1986). At this point, the child can clearly separate one language from another in speech. Fewer hybrid practices—code switching between languages and the consecutive translation of a piece of text, for example—crop up.

The Language Interdependence Model

The counterargument to the language independence model states that there is considerably more interdependence between the two languages and that the two languages cannot and should not be kept apart in the brain or in the classroom. Cummins (1981) argues that some bilingual research contradicts the separate underlying proficiency model.

According to the language interde-

pendence model, language attributes from different languages being learned are not kept strictly apart within the cognitive system; rather, the two languages interact significantly with each other inside the bilingual brain. General attributes of language processing, such as phonology, syntax, and semantics, are not isolated in relation to an individual language. These attributes are all stored in one area of the brain and are shared by multiple languages that have alternative labeling systems for the same linguistic concepts. Both languages exist within the same underlying cognitive space and use the same set of cognitive skills.

For example, if a teacher presents a lesson in Spanish, the student involved does not use only the “Spanish part of the brain”—in fact, there is no designated place inside the brain just for Spanish. Rather, an emerging bilingual student can easily transfer content knowledge from a Spanish lesson into English because the rules for phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are the same no matter which language is being used. Lambert and Tucker (1972) also contend that there is

him or her to activate and modulate the two languages for each distinct context, using context cues to determine correct language choice.

Encouraging Proficiency in Each Language

Regardless of whether the two languages are situated within the same part or different parts of the brain, teachers in bilingual programs must strive to distribute the languages being taught equally in the class and curriculum. Keep the following research-based suggestions in mind as you prepare to teach multiple languages to students:

■ *Give each language equal importance in both curriculum and instruction.* Make sure that you provide an equal number of materials and resources in each language, display student work in both languages, and divide lessons equally between both languages.

■ *Encourage students to produce equal amounts of oral and written work in each language and to not mix languages within schoolwork.* Switching from one language to another, even in the middle of a sentence, is a comfortable, natural, and unconscious language act for many bilingual students (Reyes, 2004) and actually shows linguistic competence (Macswan, 1999). However, strive to help students avoid mixing languages. Model this separation in the way you speak and work in class; avoid consecutive or word-for-word translation to keep language learning pure.

■ *Encourage students to become equally proficient in both languages.* Students need the motivation and desire to learn both languages equally well. Even though one language may be dominant, your goal should be for students to have greater control of the processing strategies for each language. A student who is exposed to both languages equally in the early elementary years is more likely to develop dual linguistic systems and maintain these dual systems throughout his or her lifetime.

■ *Make the curriculum content rich*

Research shows that both majority and minority language students in dual immersion programs score high on standardized language tests.

in both languages, with language acquisition opportunities interwoven with content instruction in multiple disciplines. Expect all bilingual students, regardless of level of proficiency, to achieve high standards in each discipline and in each language. Integrate the curriculum across disciplines, interweaving language-acquisition opportunities with content instruction. Instead of focusing only on the language arts, the curriculum should get students thinking like professionals in science, social studies, and mathematics—and working in both languages.

The track record of bilingual immersion programs that maintain separation between languages speaks for itself. As my own childhood experience makes clear, when students are prompted by explicit situational cues, they can switch among many languages with amazing naturalness. ■

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