

Spanish Teachers' Opinions About the Use of Spanish in Mainstream English Classrooms Before and After Their First Year in California

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Abstract

Five Spanish teachers working in California elementary schools participated in this project. Although they were assigned to teach in mainstream English programs, they noticed that some of the Latino students in their classrooms were officially classified as English language learners (ELLs) and, as such, had difficulties understanding their explanations. This realization led the teachers to provide these students with additional explanations in Spanish to bridge the existing language gap. The purpose of this study was twofold: to examine the teachers' opinions about the role of Spanish in the English acquisition process of their ELLs and to analyze and compare their support for several theoretical and practical principles of native-language instruction before and after their first year teaching in California schools. In their responses, the teachers showed support for the tenets of bilingual education and concurred that their use of Spanish helped improve the academic progress, English acquisition, and behavior of their ELLs.

Introduction

The passage of Proposition 227 in 1998 placed extraordinary restrictions on the use of languages other than English in California classrooms. It also caused a significant decrease in the number of transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs that incorporated these languages and cultures into their curricula. Seven years after its approval, Proposition 227 may not have done away with bilingual education, but it has definitely managed to reduce the educational opportunities available to English language learners (ELLs) statewide.

The asphyxiating pressure exerted by Proposition 227 advocates seeking to impose uniform English-only policies in schools has contributed to the near eradication of TBE programs from the official jargon. Notwithstanding, numerous teachers still rely on native-language instruction to meet the linguistic and academic needs of their ELLs (Alamillo & Viramontes, 2000; Stritikus & García, 2000). Unfortunately, many of these endeavors remain unnoticed for other educators as well as the public in general because they are carried out behind closed doors and not shared openly. The present project examined the opinions of five of these teachers about the use of native-language instruction with Spanish-speaking ELLs before and after their first year teaching in California schools. The paper analyzes and compares their responses to two questionnaires used in the project, explains their rationale to justify any possible variations in their original responses about using ELLs' primary languages, and includes some of their comments regarding the impact of Spanish instruction on the linguistic and academic progress and behavior of their students.

Background

The number of ELLs enrolled in U.S. public schools has grown at an extraordinary pace in recent years. For example, it has nearly doubled in the last decade, augmenting from 2,735,952 students in 1992–1993 to 5,044,361 in 2002–2003 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, 2003). Due to their limited English proficiency, ELLs are at a disadvantage in mainstream classrooms (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). Therefore, several instructional programs have been implemented to meet their linguistic and academic needs. The most widespread have been English as a Second Language pullout, structured English immersion (SEI), and TBE (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 1995).

Of the three programs, TBE has been the most controversial because of its traditional portrayal as a threat to the assimilation of new immigrants as well as an undercover attempt to preserve minority languages and cultures to the detriment of English (Crawford, 2004). Consequently, numerous attacks have attempted to eradicate it. Proposition 227, the most recent one, has also been the most successful. Masterminded and financed by millionaire Ron Unz, Proposition 227 was approved by California voters on June 2, 1998. This success encouraged Unz to continue his attacks on bilingual education in Arizona in 2000 and in Colorado and Massachusetts in 2002 (Ramos & de Jong, 2003). His initiatives, cleverly dubbed “English for the Children,” mandated the placement of ELLs in SEI for a temporary period “not normally intended to exceed one year” (Unz & Tuchman, 1998). After ELLs had “acquired a good working knowledge of English,” they were to be placed in English-language mainstream classrooms (Unz & Tuchman).

Native-Language Instruction: Beliefs and Research

During the campaign in support of Proposition 227, Unz reiterated two messages. The first one emphasized that TBE had never worked in practice (Unz, 1997a). The second one advocated his “common sense” (Unz, 1997b) approach to teaching English to immigrant children:

Whereas young immigrant children can easily acquire full fluency in a new language, such as English, if they are heavily exposed to that language in the classroom at an early age . . . it is resolved that all children in California public schools shall be taught English as rapidly and effectively as possible. (Unz & Tuchman, 1998)

His messages found a niche among the media, as shown by the nearly 900 articles on Proposition 227-related issues flooding national newspapers and magazines in the 6 months prior to election day (de Jong & Ramos, 2003). Interestingly, most of these pieces focused on individual anecdotes illustrating the benefits of either TBE or SEI. The combination of several factors that Crawford described as “media bias” (1998, p. 5) resulted in a very favorable portrayal of Unz’s positions and a negative view of bilingual education, which was presented to the readers as politically minded and a failed experiment. Furthermore, its advocates were described as bureaucrats with vested interests in the continuation of the program (Crawford, 1998). In this emotionally charged environment, Proposition 227 was approved by 60% of the electorate on June 2, 1998, thereby becoming part of the education code of the state (Puente, 1998).

Framed in the arena of personal beliefs, the debate on 227 completely overlooked the results of scientific research in the field (de Jong & Ramos, 2003). This oversight, previously exposed by McQuillan and Tse (1996), deprived the public of sound data refuting Unz’s claims. The results of large-scale evaluation programs (Ramírez, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 2004) and meta-analyses (Greene, 1997; Willig, 1985) supported the use of primary-language instruction to help ELLs achieve higher levels of academic and linguistic proficiency in English. The knowledge and literacy ELLs possessed in their native language transferred to English, which facilitated their acquisition of this language (Krashen, 1996). Teachers, those most affected by the possible passage of 227, equally favored this instructional approach (Beckett, 1997; Bos & Reyes, 1996; Jiménez, Gersten, & Rivera, 1996; Lemberger, 1996; Lemberger, 1992; Rueda & García, 1996; Shin & Krashen, 1996). It is necessary to note that a majority of teachers in quantitative studies (Beckett; Rueda & García; Shin & Krashen) believed that primary-language instruction helped ELLs master content and develop their English skills. However, they showed more support for the theoretical principles of native-language use than for its practical implementation in the classroom.

Teachers Under Proposition 227

Since its passage, Proposition 227 has caused a steady decline in the number of TBE programs in California and, subsequently, in the number of teachers working in these programs. Prior to 1998, the number of teachers working in these programs neared 29% of the total (Gandara, 2000). This percentage decreased to 14% during the first year of the implementation of the initiative (California Department of Education, 2004a) and was limited to 6.3% in 2002–2003 (California Department of Education, 2004b). However, teachers seemed to support the underlying principles of bilingual education despite Proposition 227's stranglehold (Mora, 1999; Ramos, 2001). Along the same line, a special issue of the *Bilingual Research Journal* published in 2000 included several articles voicing teachers' frustrations with what they perceived as Proposition 227's unrealistic expectations for them and for their students. The teachers believed that, by depriving ELLs from receiving primary-language support in the classroom, the initiative prevented them from making adequate academic and linguistic progress, had negative effects on their cultural identity (Alamillo & Viramontes, 2000) and restricted their communication attempts (Dixon, Green, Yeager, Baker, & Fránquiz, 2000). For the teachers, those ELLs who achieved success did so due to the strong background in their primary language they had developed in bilingual programs, not to the English-only programs they had to implement: "from what I can tell, that the kids who have the strong skills—reading and writing—in their primary language are the kids who really do well academically overall" (Stritikus & García, 2000, p. 80).

The present study was intended to add a new point of view to the body of research on "teachers' voices" (Lemberger, 1992, p. 1) on primary-language instruction in the post-227 era by introducing first-year foreign teachers' voices who were not familiar with any of the issues discussed here. Spanish teachers participating in the California–Spain Visiting Teachers Program (CSVTP) offered an extraordinary opportunity to explore this topic. They had never taught before in the United States, had not had any prior experiences with linguistic minorities in California, and had not been influenced by the political climate surrounding Proposition 227. Their opinions, hence, were not subject to predetermined assumptions or biases in favor of or against TBE or SEI, the two main instructional approaches under scrutiny.

The California–Spain Visiting Teachers Program

In 1986 representatives from the California Department of Education and the Ministry of Education and Science of Spain signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to address "critically important educational goals through international collaboration" (California Department of Education, 1993, p. 1), such as students' and teachers' exposure to other languages and cultures

and the alleviation of the shortage of Spanish-speaking teachers in California classrooms. Three initiatives were established to accomplish these objectives: the CSVTP, a series of summer seminars for bilingual and Spanish as a Foreign Language teachers, and a teacher exchange program. Of the three, the CSVTP has undoubtedly become the most popular, judging by the nearly 1,300 teachers who have participated in it since its inception (E. Tovar, personal communication, September 27, 2004). This success has contributed to its nationwide expansion. As an example, 25 state departments of education signed MOUs with their Spanish counterpart for the 2002–2003 school year, resulting in nearly 800 job opportunities for Spanish teachers to work in the United States (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2002).

The purpose of the original CSVTP was to place selected Spanish teachers in “K–12 public school teaching positions in California where their Spanish language skills and professional background and experience can enrich the education of California students” (California Department of Education, 1993, Appendix, p. 1). Hence, during the first year of the MOU, CSVTP participants were mostly assigned to teach in TBE programs in elementary schools, based on the needs of the different districts that hired them. The decrease in the number of TBE programs available caused by Proposition 227 affected the number and placement of CSVTP teachers in subsequent years. Since the MOU did not require a fixed number of yearly hires, the numbers of CSVTP teachers fluctuated, for example, from the 82 teachers hired for the 1999–2000 school year to the 150 hired for 2001–2002. Their placements were limited to mostly SEI in elementary schools or different content areas in secondary education, where their Spanish skills were not as essential. Ironically, this realignment created an interesting paradox: The CSVTP teachers had to teach in English to Spanish-speaking ELLs who would have benefited from Spanish instruction due to their low proficiency in English.

The present project was conducted in one of these contexts. It involved CSVTP teachers working in an inner-city southern California school district. A dramatic demographic change had turned the district’s traditional African American makeup into a half–African American, half-Latino environment. Despite this, and mainly as a result of Proposition 227, most of the instructional programs of the district remained either SEI or mainstream. The Spanish teachers had been officially assigned to the latter, although they noticed that many of their Latino students were classified as ELLs; moreover, they also noticed that many newly arrived as well as other already-enrolled Spanish-speaking ELLs were subtly placed in their classrooms to receive Spanish support. In other words, the teachers felt that they were being expected to provide explanations in Spanish despite the fact that, theoretically, their programs did not contemplate this supplemental help. Faced with the dilemma of adhering to program guidelines or helping their ELLs by using Spanish, the teachers opted for the second option. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to

examine their opinions about the role of the primary language in the English acquisition process of their ELLs. Their responses were expected to shed light on the following questions:

1. Is the primary language useful in the English acquisition process of ELLs?
2. Did your opinion vary throughout the year? If so, did your own experience using Spanish influence these variations?

In addition, given that the tremendous focus on English impregnating the schooling of ELLs is one of the main causes of heritage-language loss for them (Krashen, 1998), another question was added that asked the teachers whether they thought that the use of the primary language of the students should be discontinued at any time.

Method

Participants

Ten teachers participated in this study initially. All of them were part of the 2002–2003 CSVTP contingent. They had been selected in Spain by the only southern California school district participating in the program that year. None of them had had any prior experience teaching in the United States.

They attended an orientation meeting in August, before the start of their school year, to discuss the procedures and objectives of the project. During the meeting the researcher informed them that their participation in the study entailed answering the same questionnaire twice, once at the end of the meeting and a second time in June of the following year, that he would contact them to clarify those answers to the two administrations of the questionnaire that showed important differences, and that they would be required to meet with the other participants to discuss topics related to the schooling of linguistic minorities. All 10 teachers answered the first survey, but only 5 of them remained active at the completion of the project. Consequently, the study focuses on the responses of these 5 teachers. Pseudonyms were used to preserve their anonymity. Carmen, Ana, and Rosa were the names chosen for the three female teachers, and Luis and Antonio for the two male teachers.

Their ages ranged from 26 to 36. Three had bachelor's degrees in education and the remaining two had master's degrees in language and physical education, respectively. They averaged 5 years of teaching experience in Spain. Four had taught Spanish as a Second Language to Chinese, Moroccan, and Eastern European immigrants for a very limited time. Three rated their second-language (English) skills as better in listening and reading than speaking and writing, and two rated themselves as "very fluent" in a second language (Spanish). The latter created an additional entry for English as their

third language since they considered themselves trilingual (having been born and raised in Catalonia, they spoke Catalan as their native language, Spanish as their second, and English as their third). All of them were assigned to teach in mainstream English classrooms. Two of them taught in a first/second combination classroom (although one of them was assigned mid-year to a second/third bilingual classroom), one in second grade, and two in third grade. All of them explained that their enrollments consisted of varying numbers of African American and Latino students. The latter possessed different levels of English proficiency, ranging from English proficient to newly arrived non-English speakers.

Instruments

A questionnaire and a semistructured interview were utilized in the project. The questionnaire, an adaptation of the instrument used by Ramos (2001), examined the teachers' opinions about several theoretical and practical aspects of primary-language use in the classroom. The questionnaire was used twice, once in August during the teachers' initial meeting and a second time in June, at the end of their school year. It consisted of two sections. The first one (Items 1–5) asked participants to provide their gender, age, degree, teaching experience, experience teaching language-minority students, second-language acquisition training, and the extent to which they had listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency in a second language. The second section survey (Items 6–17) examined the teachers' support for various theoretical and practical principles of native-language instruction. Support for each item was measured with a 7-point Likert scale. A Spanish translation of the instrument was made available to the participants, but all of them completed the English version.

The interview consisted of four questions:

1. Is the primary language useful in the English acquisition process of ELLs?
2. Have you changed your opinion throughout the year?
3. Did your use of Spanish influence your views?
4. Should primary-language use be discontinued?

In their responses to Question 3, the teachers referred the researcher to their answers to Question 1. Therefore, teachers' responses to Questions 1 and 3 were collapsed into Question 1 in the Responses to the Interview Questions section of this paper.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher asked the participants to write an identical personal code of their choice on the two questionnaires to facilitate matching and comparing their responses. They were also asked to write a contact phone number so that they could be contacted individually by the researcher during the summer.

Subsequent phone conversations with each teacher, lasting an average of 70 minutes, were audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher. During the conversations, the teachers were asked to respond to the research questions and to clarify their responses to the questionnaires that appeared to conflict with their stated views on primary-language use (e.g., Carmen's answer to Item 16). When the researcher read them the aforementioned questionnaire items and their responses, they acknowledged having made a mistake. For example, Carmen explained that "*me confundí al contestar la pregunta* [I made a mistake when answering the question]." Their clarifications were added to the analysis of their responses. Content analysis and open-ended coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) were applied to the information provided by the teachers both in regards to their opinions about primary-language use as well as their additional clarifications to their responses to the questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the participants' responses to the second section of the questionnaire as well as their answers to the research questions.

Responses to the Questionnaire

Table 1 shows participants' support for the theoretical principles of native-language instruction. The teachers agreed that high levels of primary-language literacy help students develop literacy in English, and that content learned in the primary language facilitates content learning in English. Remarkably, after a few months in the classroom, all five teachers strongly advocated primary-language instruction. Variations in Ana's responses were especially noticeable. While she only showed partial support for ELLs' development of literacy and content area in their primary language (Items 8 and 9) and their beneficial effects on English acquisition (Items 7 and 10) initially, her answers at the end of the academic year revealed a dramatic change in her perceptions. These results concur with Krashen's (1996) contention that providing ELLs with knowledge and literacy in their native languages results in a faster and easier transition to English. The instructions and explanations they receive in their primary language make English more comprehensible, which enhances their English language acquisition (Krashen).

As shown in Table 2, participants' support for primary-language use in the classroom also showed a significant increase from the first to the second administration of the survey. These results appear to support the components of good bilingual education programs (Krashen, 1996). Thus, the teachers did not think that placing ELLs in English-only programs would help them learn English better (Item 15) because the input received might not be comprehensible (Krashen). Secondly, the teachers rejected the notion that knowledge learned in the primary language would lead ELLs to an excessive reliance on this

Table 1

Support for the Theoretical Principles of Native-Language Instruction

	Carmen		Antonio		Luis		Rosa		Ana	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
6. High literacy levels in two languages result in highest development of knowledge or mental skills.	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1
7. A child who can read and write in his/her L1 [primary language] will be able to learn English faster and easier than a child who cannot read and write in his/her L1.	3	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	4	1
8. A child who is not proficient in English would do better in school if he/she learns to read and write in his/her L1.	3	2	1	1	3	3	2	2	3	1
9. Learning subject matter in L1 helps ELLs [English language learners] learn subject matter better when he/she studies it in English.	1	2	1	1	4	2	2	2	3	1
10. Students' development of literacy in L1 will facilitate the development of reading and writing in English.	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	3	1

Note. 1 = very strongly agree; 7 = very strongly disagree.

language to the detriment of English (Item 12). On the contrary, they supported the use of the primary language as the foundation that helps students develop literacy and understand the content learned in English subsequently (Items 13 and 17). According to Krashen, primary-language literacy transfers to the second language, easing and facilitating the language acquisition process. Moreover, the knowledge received in the primary language makes English more comprehensible. Finally, the teachers favored the continuation of primary-language use in the classroom (Item 11), another desirable component of good bilingual education programs for Krashen. Their support for primary-language instruction was confirmed by their rejection of the notions that the use of the primary language caused confusion among students (Item 16) and detracted from their learning English (Item 14).

Table 2 displayed a wider range of responses than Table 1. This might have been due to the fact that since the teachers had not started their assignments when they were asked to fill out the first questionnaire, their responses were not based on actual experiences. However, as happened with the first survey, their experience in the classroom resulted in a considerable amount of support for primary language at the end of the school year. As was previously explained, a few responses appeared to contradict the subjects' general support for primary-language instruction shown in their responses to other items (e.g., Carmen's answer to Item 16; Luis's responses to Items 15 and 16; Rosa's answer to Item 12; and Ana's responses to Items 11 and 17). It is important to note that all the teachers acknowledged having made a mistake or not having correctly understood the phrasing of the item when the researcher read them the respective questionnaire item and their response. For example, Ana clarified that "*me confundí por la doble negación* [I was confused because of the double negative]" in her response to Item 11, while Rosa explained that she found the phrasing of Item 12 somewhat confusing.

Responses to the Interview Questions

Four main themes were identified in the teachers' responses to whether they thought that the students' primary language benefited ELLs: subject-matter comprehension, languages of instruction, behavior, and transition to a new culture. Two categories emerged from their responses to Research Questions 2 and 3: variation/no variation in support of primary-language use; and discontinuation/no discontinuation of primary-language use, respectively.

Subject-matter comprehension

As was previously explained, all five teachers were assigned to teach in mainstream English programs. However, they noticed that some of their students were officially classified as ELLs. These students struggled linguistically and academically since they did not understand the language of instruction. As a result, they were falling behind their English-speaking

Table 2

Support for Practical Scenarios

	Carmen		Antonio		Luis		Rosa		Ana	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
11. Immigrant students should not be encouraged to use their L1 [primary language] in the classroom after they have learned English.	5	6	3	7	4	6	3	7	7	5
12. Core curriculum instruction in L1 will result in a poor level of English proficiency because the ELL [English language learner] will use his/her L1 in class instead of English.	2	5	5	7	3	6	5	2	3	6
13. Using L1 in class allows ELLs to base their learning of English on the conceptual knowledge they possess in L1.	2	2	2	1	4	2	2	2	2	1
14. Using L1 in class will have a negative effect on the ELLs' ability to learn English.	6	6	6	7	4	6	6	-	6	5
15. ELLs in an EO [English-only] classroom will learn English better.	5	6	4	5	2	2	3	6	2	7
16. Teaching ELLs in both English and L1 results in language confusion for them.	5	2	6	6	6	4	6	6	7	7
17. ELLs can participate in regular English classes with one period of L1 instruction tutorial to explain the concepts learned in the English classes.	2	-	1	1	3	3	1	2	2	5

Note. 1 = very strongly agree; 7 = very strongly disagree.

classmates. The teachers were aware that, technically, their programs did not allow any modifications involving other languages. Yet they decided to provide their ELLs with some instruction in Spanish to bridge the existing language gap. Despite the limited extent of this help, even a few minimal explanations were beneficial. For Ana,

Para mis estudiantes hispanos colocados en clases de mainstream el sistema funcionaba porque tenían apoyo, ya que yo les podía traducir. Sin embargo no lo podía hacer mucho rato porque no tenía tiempo para proveerles la atención individualizada que de verdad necesitaban.

[For my Hispanic students placed in mainstream classes, the system worked because they had support, since I could translate for them. However, I could not do it for a long time because I did not have enough time to provide them with the individualized attention they really needed.]

Luis used a similar strategy in his class. Previewing the material with his ELLs in their primary language allowed him to give them an overview of the content of the lesson:

Con estudiantes que no saben nada de inglés el puente que les ayuda son los contenidos que tienen y que reciben en su idioma nativo. La mejor manera de hacerlo es explicarles de forma seccionada en su lengua. Por ejemplo, con mis estudiantes ELL, yo les contaba justo antes de comenzar la clase de qué íbamos a hablar. Así por lo menos no se me perdían.

[With students who do not know anything in English, the bridge that helps them is the content they have and receive in their native language. The best way to do it is to explain to them in segments in their language. For example, with my ELL students, I would tell them what we were going to talk about in class right before it started. By doing this, I did not lose them.]

The teachers noticed that when their students did not have access to supplemental help in their primary language, their academic progress was threatened. For Antonio, some of his students, recent Mexican immigrants, struggled due to their lack of understanding: “*Es necesario usar su idioma nativo y enseñarles en su idioma. Yo no pude hacerlo así porque tenía que enseñarles en inglés. Yo lo ví con los niños nuevos de México. Entraron y salieron perdidos* [It is necessary to use their native language and teach them in their language. I could not do so because I had to teach them in English. I saw it with the new kids from Mexico. They came in and left lost].”

Ana shared a similar concern. She explained that “*los niños que no sabían inglés aprendieron algo gracias a que yo les podía traducir, pero después de que me marché al grupo bilingüe bajó su rendimiento. La razón era que no entendían* [The children who did not know English learned something thanks to my being able to translate for them but after I left for the bilingual group their performance decreased. The reason was because they did not understand].”

Therefore, the teachers thought that the primary language of the students played a fundamental role in the English acquisition process and progress of the latter. Far from delaying their ELLs’ progress in English, the teachers acknowledged that using the primary language to preview and emphasize the main points of the lesson helped their students achieve a better grasp of the content. As Krashen (1996) contends, the background acquired by the students in their primary language made the input they later received in English more comprehensible. Very noticeably, none of the teachers thought that the English-only environment surrounding their students was beneficial due to their ELLs’ lack of understanding of the language of instruction. These results concur with studies carried out in the field that show teachers’ support for primary-language use for linguistic minorities (Mora, 1999; Ramos, 2001).

Languages of instruction

The teachers’ strong support for Spanish did not constitute a rejection of English. On the contrary, they agreed that their main goal was to help their ELLs achieve proficiency in English. Spanish was just a cushion that facilitated the process. For Luis, “*Los términos básicos . . . se deberían explicar primero en español. Después se pueden explicar en inglés y así es más fácil, porque construyen conocimientos sobre estructuras conocidas* [The basic terms . . . should be first explained in Spanish. They can then be explained in English, and it is easier this way because (the students) can build their knowledge on structures they already know].” He used an example to illustrate the relationship between the two languages: “*Aprovechando el español los niños se benefician en inglés. Por ejemplo, al hablar del sujeto y su uso. Si los niños nuevos no tienen estos conocimientos académicos hay que ayudarles más en su lengua materna para compensar* [By taking advantage of Spanish the kids benefit in English. For example, when talking about the subject and its use. If the new kids do not possess this academic content it is necessary to help them more in their native language to make up for it].” These views support Cummins’s (1981) description of a common underlying proficiency between languages. The knowledge and literacy students possess in the primary language transfer to their second language and have strong positive effects on it. The existing relationship between the languages allows students to make connections when necessary and to rely on the knowledge they possess to fill in the gaps.

Carmen and Ana also addressed the existent interdependence between the two languages. Interdependence did not mean confusion, as Carmen explained: “*El uso del primer idioma no confunde. Por el contrario ayuda. Los niños tienen una idea clara de cuál es cuál si dominan uno de ellos claramente. Ellos saben distinguir* [The use of the primary language does not confuse students. On the contrary, it helps. The children have a clear idea of which is which if they have a command of one of them. They can distinguish].” Ana echoed this opinion and illustrated the problems derived from placing ELLs in environments that do not support primary-language development:

Los niños LEP en mainstream mezclaban los idiomas y los confundían porque mezclaban lo que habían aprendido en su idioma materno con lo que les enseñaban en el otro. Los del bilingüe no lo hacían porque recibían más y mejor instrucción en español.

[The LEPs (limited English proficient students) in mainstream mixed the languages and were confused because they mixed what they had learned in their primary language with what they were taught in the other one. Those in bilingual programs did not do so because they received more and better instruction in Spanish.]

Antonio dispelled the notion that Spanish was detrimental to English: “*El uso del idioma nativo no es un obstáculo en el aprendizaje del inglés ni les quita tiempo [a los estudiantes] para aprender este idioma* [The use of the native language is neither an obstacle for English acquisition nor takes away (students’) time to learn this language].” For Luis, there was an initial delay in the English acquisition process of ELLs, but he did not attribute it to a negative influence of Spanish; rather, he attributed it to the fact that the students were being exposed to two languages. Despite this temporary drawback, they made progress in Spanish and English: “*En mi experiencia, los niños tardan algo más en desarrollar el lenguaje, pero luego tienen una mayor fluidez que les permite avanzar mucho más rápido en los dos idiomas* [In my experience, it takes the kids a little bit longer to develop the language, but they later develop more fluency that allows them to advance much more quickly in both languages].”

As was previously mentioned, the teachers’ opinions reflected the beneficial effects of primary-language use in the classroom. In doing so they concurred with the results of studies that reached the same conclusion (Beckett, 1997; Bos & Reyes, 1996; Greene, 1997; Lemberger, 1996; Lemberger, 1992; Ramírez, 1992; Rueda & García, 1996; Shin & Krashen, 1996; Thomas & Collier, 2004; Willig, 1985). The teachers considered the primary language as a springboard that facilitated second-language literacy thanks to the existing relationship between languages (Cummins, 1981). The development of literacy in the primary language helped students acquire knowledge that could be

transferred to the second language. This acted as a shortcut into English literacy. At the same time it helped students make progress in both languages without mixing them. As Ovando, Collier, and Combs (2003) explain, many children raised bilingually may appear to combine both languages as part of their learning experience, but they will separate them once they identify the two language systems to which they belong. The danger of placing students in subtractive environments where their primary languages are not utilized is that they might not clearly differentiate between them, as Ana pointed out. Those students who did not receive instruction in their primary language had more difficulties identifying the two systems and completing their thoughts than those whose primary-language literacy was promoted and developed consistently. The teachers' opinions about the use of the primary language in the classroom appeared to contradict widespread public opinion favoring submersion programs as well as some well-publicized cases demanding the elimination of bilingual education (Krashen, 1999)

Behavior

The teachers described the daily struggle of their ELLs. On the one hand, they had to learn academic content in a language many of them found utterly incomprehensible. On the other, they were supposed to do so without help. The results of this combination were not surprising. Since the students could not participate adequately in class because they lacked the linguistic and academic skills necessary to perform at a level comparable to their English-speaking counterparts, they became increasingly bored, disinterested, and distracted. As a result, they stopped paying attention and started causing discipline problems in the classroom. Carmen thought this was understandable:

Es necesario usar inglés . . . pero con uso de español porque, si no, causa stress y problemas de disciplina por falta de información y entendimiento al no recibir instrucción en el idioma nativo. Como resultado, los niños se aburren porque no entienden y el comportamiento va a peor.

[It is necessary to use English . . . but with use of Spanish because, if not, it causes stress and discipline problems due to lack of information and understanding caused by not receiving instruction in the native language. As a result, the students get bored because they do not understand, and their behavior worsens.]

Along the same lines, Luis provided a clear example of the existing relationship between students' understanding of the language and improved behavior in the classroom. Although other non-Spanish-speaking teachers struggled to maintain an orderly environment with their ELLs, he did not experience the same problems due to his proficiency in Spanish:

Había unos maestros . . . que me mandaban a los niños que no hablaban inglés porque decían que no se comportaban bien en sus salones. Cuando los niños se daban cuenta de que yo hablaba bien el español y les explicaba en español se tranquilizaban y prestaban mucha más atención.

[There were some teachers . . . who would send me the kids who did not speak English because they said they did not behave in their classrooms. When the kids realized that I spoke Spanish well and I explained in Spanish to them, they would calm down and pay much more attention.]

The plight of these ELLs was similar to the scenarios reported by Schirling, Contreras, and Ayala (2000), in which lack of comprehension of the language of instruction turned ELLs with low levels of English proficiency into a “tough group of kids” and a “very difficult class” (p. 135). This is understandable when the ELLs’ schooling conditions are analyzed. Having to spend a significant number of hours a day in a classroom where the instruction was not comprehensible and there was no additional help in the form of visuals, charts, or simplified language on the part of the teacher caused students to become frustrated, which, in turn, triggered their bad behavior. Interestingly, as clearly exemplified by Luis, once the primary language was used again to convey meaningful pieces of information, communication was reestablished and behavior problems were minimized.

Transition to a new culture

For Ovando, Collier, and Combs (2003), there are numerous emotional, linguistic, and academic issues students must face when initiating their schooling experience in a new society. Among them are a wide range of behaviors, different schooling experiences, possible emotional scars, the sudden realization of being different, lack of English proficiency, and lack of academic background. Language (or lack of thereof) is undoubtedly one of the most salient features in this process because it establishes the first noticeable difference between the new arrivals and their English-speaking counterparts. The difficulties associated with this traumatic transition pervaded all the conversations with the teachers. All of them spoke about taking into consideration the well-being of their students before enrolling them in certain programs. Naturally, the language of instruction occupied a prominent position in their comments. Thus, Rosa explained:

Depende de la edad y del tiempo que lleven aquí. Si llevan varios años se les puede colocar en inmersión. Pero poner a los nuevos en English-only es muy doloroso. Si no pueden comunicarse van a sufrir y hay que recordar que la transición y la acomodación a un nuevo sistema, especialmente aquí, son muy duras.

[It depends on their age and the time they have lived here. If they have lived here for a few years, they can be placed in immersion. But placing the new ones in English-only is very painful. If they can't communicate they are going to suffer, and we have to remember that the transition and the accommodation to a new system, especially here, are very hard.]

Luis reiterated this view and described what might happen to those students who, being new arrivals in the country, were placed in mainstream classes:

Si un niño LEP que acaba de llegar es colocado en una clase de English-only lo va a pasar mal. El maestro lo va a dejar de lado y el niño no va a aprender. Pero si a ese niño se le va enseñando poco a poco el inglés el proceso será más lento, pero el niño estará más estable y será más feliz.

[If a newly arrived LEP (limited English proficient student) is placed in an English-only classroom, he is going to have a difficult time. The teacher will leave him aside and he will not learn. But if that child is taught English little by little, the process will be slower but the child will be more stable and happier.]

Variations in opinions about primary-language use

Carmen, Antonio, and Ana explained that they had not changed their opinions throughout the year, and that they continued to support native-language instruction (although Ana's initial responses showed only moderate support for this option). Carmen explained that her own bilingual schooling in Spain had made her well aware of the benefits of bilingual education: "*Si uno tiene conocimientos en dos lenguas es más fácil aprender otro idioma. Hay más posibilidades de transferir conceptos* [If one has knowledge in two languages, it is easier to learn another language. There are more possibilities of transferring concepts]." She echoed a topic previously covered by her colleagues: "*La falta de dominio del inglés causa problemas e inquietud entre los niños porque no se enteran bien ni de las explicaciones ni de lo que tienen que hacer* [The lack of command of English causes problems and restlessness to the children because they understand neither the explanations nor what they are supposed to do]." Antonio agreed with this view and expressed his concern that his students might experience academic failure in the future, if they do not receive help in their native language: "*Leer, van a leer las frases en inglés que aparecen en los libros, pero no van a entender nada* [Read, they will read the English sentences appearing in the books, but they will not understand anything]."

Luis and Rosa, on the other hand, explained that their original positions shifted toward more support for primary-language use. This change was due to two factors: their initial unawareness of the challenges and demands of their new job, and their realization that using Spanish benefited the English acquisition process of their ELLs. Rosa, in particular, observed that the Spanish support she provided helped her Hispanic students measure up to and even surpass some of their native English-speaking classmates. Interestingly, this improvement had an unexpected effect on her African American students:

Mi opinión cambió por los alumnos. Al principio estaban en English-only y yo seguía el método que me habían dicho, Open Court, todo en inglés. Pero llegó un momento en que los hispanos no entendían y usaban el español para entenderse conmigo y entre ellos. Los afro-americanos veían que los hispanos progresaban muy rápido gracias a su idioma nativo y comenzaron a protestar, pero al final me pedían que les contara cosas de España y en español. A los hispanos les dió una gran alegría.

[My opinion changed because of my students. In the beginning they were in English-only and I followed the method they told me, Open Court, everything in English. But it came to a point where since my Hispanic students did not understand, they used Spanish to communicate with me and among them. My African American students saw that the Hispanics were progressing very rapidly thanks to their native language and began to complain but, at the end, they would ask me to tell them things about Spain and in Spanish. This gave my Hispanic students great happiness.]

Discontinuation of students' primary languages

When asked whether the use of the native language should be discontinued, the teachers described different scenarios for two ELL groups: ELLs learning English and ELLs who had achieved proficiency in English. Regarding the first scenario, ELLs learning English, all the teachers clarified that any decisions regarding ELLs should take into consideration their linguistic and academic needs. Rosa thought that “*para facilitarles la transición hay que darles la ayuda que necesitan* [to facilitate their transition it is necessary to give them the help they need].” For all the teachers, this meant providing ELLs with primary-language support to facilitate their English acquisition. For Antonio, “*el uso del idioma nativo es una herramienta útil para aprender inglés* [the use of the primary language is a useful tool to learn English].”

Regarding the second scenario, three teachers (Luis, Rosa, and Carmen) felt that the primary language could be discontinued at school after ELLs were deemed proficient in English. However, for Luis this did not mean that it also had to be discontinued at home: “*a nivel académico sí, porque fuera de la*

escuela todo es en inglés: libros, enciclopedias, exámenes, . . . pero dejar de usarlo en la familia no [at an academic level, yes, because outside the school everything is in English: books, encyclopedias, exams, . . . but stop its use in the family, no].” On the other hand, Ana and Antonio were opposed to the discontinuation of Spanish. They cited different reasons to justify their opinions. Ana was reassigned to a TBE program for a few months during the school year. She was able to provide her students with more and a longer exposure to Spanish, which helped them achieve a better command of this language. They were also less likely to confuse English and Spanish, the two languages of instruction. As for Antonio, one of his friends worked in a two-way bilingual program, and he personally observed that “*sus estudiantes progresaron mucho más rápidamente y avanzaban muy rápido* [his students progressed much more rapidly and advanced very quickly].”

To summarize, all five teachers advocated the transitional use of Spanish to smooth the English acquisition process of their ELLs. They believed that their use of Spanish helped their ELLs achieve higher levels of linguistic and academic development in English, made lessons more understandable, contributed to better classroom management, and provided much needed emotional support for newly arrived immigrants. The teachers acknowledged that their common goal was to place their ELLs in mainstream classes. However, they did not think that their ELLs could make adequate academic and linguistic progress in sink-or-swim environments where they did not understand the language of instruction.

Conclusion

Proposition 227 required that all ELLs in California attend SEI programs for a short period of time and be subsequently moved to mainstream English classes. The goal of the initiative was twofold: to expedite the English acquisition process of these students and to eliminate bilingual education. However, 7 years after the passage of the initiative, the annual redesignation rate for ELLs remains stabilized around 8% (Grissom, 2004). Moreover, more than 47,000 ELLs statewide are placed in classrooms where they are not receiving adequate English-language instructional services, according to the California Department of Education (2004c). The teachers participating in this project worked in one of these environments. Given the shortcomings of the program, they helped their ELLs in Spanish despite the English-only program they were required to implement. According to the teachers, this support, though limited in scope, helped their ELLs better understand the content, accelerated their English acquisition, and improved their behavior.

The results of this project confirm the beneficial effects of native-language instruction in second language acquisition. Furthermore, they clearly illustrate that, despite the approval of coercive measures intended to curtail the presence

of minority languages in the classroom, teachers continue to use these languages to help their ELLs. Unfortunately, as was the case in this study, their efforts remain largely undercover. It is necessary to start publicizing these efforts for various reasons. First, by doing this, the public will not erroneously attribute the successful outcomes of these endeavors to programs bearing the English-only label. Second, it will help educate the public on the positive impact that native-language instruction has on the academic and linguistic progress of ELLs. Third, it will act as a reminder that decisions in education must be based on the linguistic and academic needs of ELLs. Finally, and more importantly, because it will help illustrate the fallacy of quick-fix approaches, created and supported by English-only advocates, for whom the intricacies of a long and arduous learning process are reduced to a simplistic “send the current system to the junkyard in June 1998, begin teaching English to all children in our schools at that point, and achieve something closer to 99% fluency among California schoolchildren by January 1999” (Unz, 1997c).

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