

## **LEARNING TO TEACH CONTENT BILINGUALLY IN A MIDDLE SCHOOL BILINGUAL CLASSROOM**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this year long study was to work with two Spanish-English bilingual middle school teachers who primarily used translation to ensure language comprehension and (1) re-orient them to an alternative perspective on learning and (2) teach them a new way of interacting with students bilingually during content teaching. The study addressed the following research questions: 1) How were teachers' views about bilingual teaching and how students learn demonstrated in their instruction? Did these views change after participating in workshops, discussions, and practices? 2) What reasons did teachers give for switching from one language to the other during content instruction? Did the reasons change after participating in workshops, discussions and practice? 3) What kinds of bilingual teaching strategies did teachers rely on during instruction? Did these strategies change after participating in workshops, discussions and practice?

The two teachers primarily viewed teaching bilingually as providing comprehensible input in the language students understood best. Both teachers relied mainly on concurrent translation. As a result of workshops and discussions, the teachers made two substantial changes: (1) they virtually stopped using translation from English to Spanish to enhance student comprehension, and (2) they distributed to the two languages so that they spent more or less equal amounts of time in the two languages. Moreover, as they became more aware of their teaching and how to change it, the teachers also began to incorporate language distribution considerations into their lesson plans.

### **Introduction**

Research on language use in bilingual classrooms consistently has shown that many bilingual teachers use two languages concurrently during content area instruction, regardless of whether the classroom is organized for separate or concurrent language use (Wong Fillmore & Valadez, 1986). Moreover, ESL teachers who are bilingual but not designated as bilingual teachers may also use two languages for teaching, especially in classrooms with large numbers of students who share the non-English language they speak (Auerbach, 1993; Lucas & Katz, 1994). The research also demonstrates that how teachers use two languages during instruction differs considerably depending on how the teacher has been prepared in bilingual instructional methodology (Milk, 1993). Teachers without special preparation in concurrent language instruction tend to alternate between the two languages on the basis of how well students are comprehending the language of the lesson, how well they are paying attention, and how well they are participating in it. More often than not, this leads to an extensive use of translation from English into the students' primary language to facilitate comprehension and to move the lesson along (see Author's Note). Accordingly, students may have few opportunities to develop an understanding of and participate in knowledge systems in both languages.

Teachers with preparation that focuses specifically on concurrent language use are taught to draw from a wide variety of cue sources located within the confines of the classroom. The cues range from student-based indicators such as language comprehension and active participation to time considerations; i.e., the allocation of the two languages for exchanges with students during content teaching so that each language is used more or less equally (Faltis, 1989). One of the goals of concurrent language use is the balanced distribution of the two languages over time. If students participate in learning activities in both languages over time, the likelihood is great that not only will they have greater access to the content, but will develop their bilingual abilities as well.

### **Acquisition by Knowledge Systems**

In addition to providing access to and participation in classroom learning activities, non-translation concurrent teaching has the potential to reorient teachers away from viewing learning solely as the acquisition of knowledge systems (including language) *by* students and toward an understanding of learning as the acquisition of students *by* knowledge systems mediated through two languages. This reorientation requires teachers to understand the largely social nature of language and content learning. From this perspective, learning does not occur *solely* in the heads of students who are motivated to learn (as many cognitive psychologists and language acquisition theorists would have us believe). Much of what people learn is situated within the interaction between them and more capable and knowing members of a knowledge system community, and as a result of being invited into the knowledge system of interest by members of the community (Faltis & Hudelson, 1994; Lave & Wenger, 1991). That is not to say that learners don't rely on creative constructions through hypothesizing and (over)generalizing, but rather that these cognitive processes do not represent the totality of learning.

When the primary goal of bilingual teaching is comprehension through translation, rather than enabling students to understand concepts, principles and processes through exchanges and the negotiation of meaning, joining the community of knowledge in either language is difficult. Not only do students tune out when the teacher is talking in their second language, they learn quickly that the teacher will translate the talk into their primary language to make sure they comprehend the language, but not necessarily the concepts, principles, and processes associated with the knowledge system. Moreover, students figure out quickly that they can control the language of exchanges by switching to the language of their preference when they engage in conversation with the teacher. Accordingly, when the teacher translates to ensure language comprehension and invite student participation the result is that students rarely if ever exchange whole ideas in one language or the other when discussing academic subject matter that counts. However, when the teacher switches from one language to the other to help students *understand* concepts, principles

and processes and *use* them with new problems and in new situations (Gardner, 1993), students are more likely to develop both languages and be acquired by the knowledge system within which they are interacting. The reason for this is twofold: first, students are interacting about academic matters substantially in two languages, both their native and their second language; and second, because this is how children are acquired into bilingual communities. Bilingual caregivers and siblings interact about the topics that matter to them in two languages, switching from one language to the other for a variety of sociolinguistic reasons (Faltis, 1989).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to work with two Spanish-English bilingual middle school teachers who primarily used translation to ensure language comprehension and (1) re-orient them to an alternative perspective on learning and (2) teach them a new way of interacting with students bilingually during content teaching. Accordingly, the study proposed to address the following research questions:

- 1) How were teachers' views about bilingual teaching and how students learn demonstrated in their instruction? Did these views change after participating in workshops, discussions, and practices?
- 2) What reasons did teachers give for switching from one language to the other during content instruction? Did the reasons change after participating in workshops, discussions and practice?
- 3) What kinds of bilingual teaching strategies did teachers rely on during instruction? Did these strategies change after participating in workshops, discussions and practice?

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted in two phases over an entire academic school year, 1992-93. In phase one, I observed and interviewed the two teachers over a period of four months (September to December) for approximately five hours a week to learn how they used Spanish and English for interaction with students during content lessons. In my field

notes, I jotted down the ways the teachers used Spanish and English as they interacted with students in whole class as well as small group instruction. Early in the month of December, I videotaped each teacher for at least one hour during a typical content lesson. Then after school on the same day, using the Stimulated Recall Technique (Clark & Peterson, 1981), the teacher and I watched the video tape together, and I asked the teacher to explain what was going on as they switched from one language to the other. Among that questions I used during the viewing of the tape were the following:

1. What were you doing in this segment and why?
2. Why did you decide to use [Spanish or English] during this segment? Why did you switch here?
3. What were you noticing about the students as you made your decisions?
4. What other aspects of the situation might have affected which language you used in this segment?

The teachers' responses to the interview were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed for further analysis. The purpose of this phase was to learn about the two teachers' views of learning and to uncover the motives behind their bilingual teaching strategies.

Following this, the teachers and I met in three workshop formats over a six week period beginning in February to discuss different ways of teaching bilingually so that students understand and use both languages more or less equally during content instruction. We discussed the social nature of learning and language use, and I introduced them to a modified cue system adapted from Rodolfo Jacobson's New Concurrent Approach (Jacobson, 1982). In this system, the goal is to monitor language use during bilingual teaching by paying attention to cues about language use, the nature of the lesson, student understanding, and the time spent in each language. Table I presents the cue system that I used in this study. Upon completion of the workshops and discussion sessions in March, I initiated phase two, the examination of whether and how the two teachers modified their views of bilingual teaching, and how they alternated between Spanish and English in the final two months of the academic year. In May, 1993, I again videotaped the two teachers for at least an hour during a content lesson. At the end of the day, each teacher and I viewed the videotape of the lesson and through

Stimulated Recall, discussed the reasons for switching and what was going on in the lesson.

Table 1  
*Cue-Response System for Code-Switching during Teaching*  
(from Jacobson, 1982)

**Content Learning Cues**

- A) Conceptual Development:  
Switch from L2 to L1 to help students understand key features or points of concepts so that they begin to participate in the knowledge based on their own understanding.
- B) Review:  
Switch from L1 to L2 to review concepts and key information already presented in the L1. Focus on assessing and assisting questions to engage students in exchanges in their L2.
- C) Attention Getting:  
Switch from L1 to L2 to bring students into the discourse and make sure they are with the lesson at any given point.
- D) Praise and Evaluation of Student's Contribution:  
Switch from L2 to L1 to praise or evaluate student's participation before switching back to L2; this separates assessment from other discourse interactions.

**Language Development Cues**

- A) Variable Language Proficiency:  
Students need opportunities to listen and engage in talk in their native and the L2; hence, a switch from one to the other depending on language abilities.
- B) Vocabulary Enrichment:  
Switch from L2 to L1 to discuss the meaning of word in context; avoid translation.
- C) Translatability:  
Have students render a concept that the teacher explains in the L2 in the L1, using extended speech.

### **Curriculum-Related Cue**

- A) Topic:  
Switch from one language to the other to demonstrate a close association between the language of discussion and the topic under consideration. The idea is to switch to L1 for certain topics.

### **Interpersonal Relationship Cues**

- A) Privacy/Formality:  
There may be times when the teacher needs to use L1 to talk privately about personal matters with students or for more formal topics about personal matters.
- B) Appropriateness/Courtesy:  
For certain kinds of classroom activities, it may be necessary to converse in the L1 to beginning L2 speakers. The same idea holds if there are non-L1 speakers in the activity. Switch to the language the greatest number of students are most likely to follow.

One of the goals of this study was to contribute to the research base concerning needed bilingual methodology at the secondary level where using two languages during content instruction is considered to be an appropriate form of instruction (Faltis & Arias, 1993; Faltis, 1993; Lucas & Katz, 1994). I was interested in exploring and describing how two bilingual middle school teachers view bilingual teaching and use Spanish and English for content teaching before and after learning about teaching bilingually from a social learning perspective and using a cue system for making decisions about when to switch and why.

### **The Setting**

The study was conducted at Green Hills Middle School, a 7th and 8th grade level school that opened its doors in the Fall of 1992 (all names are pseudonyms). Two bilingual teachers were hired to teach in the Bilingual Program, which comprised one of six major families of the school (see Faltis, 1994 for a further description of the school). Each family was housed in a separate building, and students within the family

were assigned a homeroom. The curriculum for the entire school was designed so that students in a family spend half of their day covering major subject matter content together with peers belonging to the same family unit. Students spent the rest of the day in individual classes that were scheduled within the more traditional 55 minute time block. In this manner, students from various families were physically integrated for at least part of the day. This design allowed teachers to schedule instruction across major subject matter content with greater blocks of time devoted to integrated content teaching and learning.

### **Participants**

The focus of this study was on the two teachers who taught in the bilingual program. One bilingual teacher, CT, was certified in secondary education with a specialization in science, and was in the process of obtaining a full bilingual endorsement. The other teacher, MB, was a certified secondary teacher with a specialization in English. Both CT and MB had minimal experience teaching in bilingual programs, though both had worked extensively with bilingual students in a variety of settings. Both teachers had advanced proficiency in Spanish and were able to teach content in Spanish; MB had lived for 11 years in Spain. The two teachers were responsible for approximately 70 seventh and eighth grade students who comprised the bilingual family unit of the school. At the beginning of the school year about half of the students had no proficiency in English; the remainder were at various stages of adding English as second language. All but five of the students in the program were native Spanish speakers, and all but one of these were fairly literate in Spanish. Most of the students were immigrants from Mexico. Approximately one third of the students were bilingual before coming to Green Hills, and had one or more years of schooling in a U.S. public elementary school.

### **Results**

The results are presented in terms of the research questions that guided the study.

**Question No. 1).** *How were teachers' views about bilingual teaching and how students learn demonstrated in their instruction? Did*



*these views change after participating in workshops, discussions, and practices?* In the first interview conducted in December, the two teachers voiced similar views about bilingual teaching and the way students learned. Both teachers expressed that bilingual teaching involves the presentation of directions and content concepts by switching from one language to one other, "done with an objective in mind" (transcripts, 12/92). However, CT added that teaching content bilingually is also switching from one language to the other "for clarification or really when I watch their faces and I see they don't understand... and then just for basic instructions" (transcripts, 12/94).

Both teachers viewed bilingual teaching as different from codeswitching, which they defined as "changing from one language to another" usually to add emphasis (transcripts 12/92). MB, who had acquired Spanish in Spain, equated codeswitching behavior with "speaking Spanglish," or mixing the two languages together. She also felt that while codeswitching may be a form of bilingual teaching, bilingual teaching does not necessarily involve codeswitching. For her, bilingual teaching meant staying in the language for longer stretches of language before switching to the other language. Codeswitching, on the other hand, was more at the word level. CT contrasted codeswitching with bilingual teaching as follows: "I think bilingual [teaching] is a conscientious effort to the use Spanish whereas codeswitching is using Spanish use to clarify something or to give a brief explanation" (transcripts, 12/92).

Interestingly, neither teacher said that translation was a significant feature of their bilingual teaching strategies. Translation, especially the quick translation of words and short phrases to move the lesson along, was viewed as a codeswitching behavior and therefore, not part of bilingual teaching. Both acknowledged, however, that translation was a valuable tool for aiding language comprehension within a lesson framework, especially for vocabulary and clarifying directions.

During my observation of classroom teaching episodes, I learned that the two teachers, in fact, relied a great deal on translation when they interacted with students. Of a total of 230 switches noted, more than 80 per cent were translations from English into Spanish, ostensibly to ensure comprehension. The remaining switches were for scolding, regaining attention, and language purposes.

After the workshops and discussions, and with practice, the teachers were able to articulate more clearly the distinctions and similarities between code-switching behaviors and bilingual teaching. The teachers read and discussed several articles on codeswitching and the New Current Approach (Faltis, 1989; Jacobson, 1982; Jacobson, 1990). Each teacher was also given handouts and specific instructions on using cues and paying attention to time for making switching decisions. We also discussed the social nature of learning and talked about strategies such as the negotiation of meaning, scaffolding, and responding to student talk in Spanish as well as English.

One teacher commented that after the workshops and with practice, she began to feel more like "*una verdadera maestra bilingüe*" [a true bilingual teacher] (field notes 4/93) because by controlling her language switches, she was forced to pay more attention to how she interacted with students in the two languages. The two teachers also expressed the view that bilingual teaching was much more than supplying comprehensible language to students. While they both still believed in the value of providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), they also began to see how language comprehension alone did not necessarily lead to understanding of concepts, principles and processes. Nonetheless, this was the weakest part of their development of views on bilingual teaching and how students learn. Neither CT nor MB seemed to be able to shake off completely the view that providing comprehensible language was only part of their goal as bilingual teachers. Both teachers continued to frame their stance about teaching bilingually as providing comprehensible input.

Finally, their views on the value of translation for use in teaching vocabulary or for speedy delivery of a lesson changed considerably. By the end of the school year the two teachers came to believe that translation probably hindered rather than helped learning in the long run.

**Question No. 2).** *What reasons did teachers give for switching from one language to the other during content instruction? Did the reasons change after participating in workshops, discussions and practice?* The answer to this question was gained from the two Stimulated Recall sessions in which the teachers explained what they were doing in the lesson that was videotaped and why they switched languages. The most frequent reason given was to clarify the meaning of a word, followed by

"making language comprehensible," and finally, "to provide clear instructions" (videotapes, 12/92). The first reasons mainly show a concern for vocabulary comprehension; the third one, with process comprehension. Two other reasons for switching offered by the teachers were for getting at nuances that are difficult to say in one language or the other and for following the lead of students. For example, on one occasion MB said that she switched into Spanish because it was more appropriate for a particular saying. She elaborated that this often happened when she was joking with the students. On several occasions, both CT and MB explained that they switched languages in response to the language last used by the students (see Faltis, 1989 for a discussion of the inertial rule). Usually, these switches were from English to Spanish.

Upon viewing the videotapes of the lessons, both teachers were amazed at the number of times they relied on concurrent translation during their teaching. The teachers explained the heavy use of translation as a concern for language comprehension, especially forgetting at vocabulary items. The teachers came to realize that one of the reasons that the students might be progressing slowly in English and having trouble understanding fundamental concepts in the content areas was that they were doing a great deal of translation from English to Spanish and focusing more on language comprehension than content understanding.

In January, the teachers began the workshops, readings and discussions. Early in February, they agreed to practice each set of cues outlined on the summary sheets for a period of two weeks, and then meet again to discuss what happened. Once the workshops, discussions, and practice were completed in March, the teachers taught on their own for approximately one month before there were again videotaped and interviewed through the Stimulated Recall technique.

In general, both CT and MB showed an increase in awareness of the ways that they could alternate between languages as they taught after the workshops and readings. In the second Stimulated Recall session, both teachers mentioned three more reasons for switching than they did in the first session (all of which had been studied and practiced); but the most frequent reason was still how well the student was comprehending language. Both teachers remarked that they felt overwhelmed by the

number of cues and expressed having difficulty monitoring cue decisions while concentrating on teaching. Of the new cues they practiced, switching for the purpose of getting the students' attention for a key point in the lesson was one they felt was easy to acquire. Moreover, both teachers mentioned that the time spent in the language was a feature in bilingual teaching that they could pay attention to while they were interacting with students.

**Question No. 3).** *What kinds of bilingual teaching strategies did teachers rely on during instruction? Did these strategies change after participating in workshops, discussions and practice?* To answer this question, I relied on two sources: classroom observation notes and the Stimulated Recall sessions. During the first part of the year, before the teachers participated in workshops, discussions and practice, by far the most prominent teaching strategy was concurrent translation done for the purpose of enhancing student comprehension.

Both teachers organized their instruction so that they did most of the classroom talking (very similar to what Goodlad [1984] found in most secondary level classrooms across the U.S. and what Homberger & Micheau [1993] found in a bilingual middle school). The teachers opened their lessons with instructions and often with an advance organizer which they wrote on the chalkboard. Next they presented the major concepts and principles to be covered in the lesson, and interspersed this phase with known information questions as a way to check for comprehension. One of the teachers, CT, tended to begin the introduction and advance organizers in English and then would switch to Spanish and translate what she had said to make sure that students were with her. MB on the other hand, tended to switch back and forth from one language to the other during this phase of the lesson, and then try to interact with students in English. Again, however, MB translated from English to Spanish, but she also tended to stay in Spanish for a longer period time than CT did.

Most of the interaction with students occurred either during "giving directions" time or during "give examples" time. Students frequently asked the teachers for clarification about what they were supposed to, especially if the instructions were presented in English. Both CT and MB rarely tried to rephrase or to scaffold the meaning of what they were trying to say; instead, they simply translated the instructions quickly and

continued on with the lesson. The same kind of pattern emerged from observations of when the teachers asked students for examples or for meaning of words that were assumed to be difficult. Moreover, the teachers often asked students to translate the gloss of a word from one language to another. Here is an example taken from my field notes (November, 1992):

- T: Can anybody tell me what a "symphony" is?  
 S. Sí maestra, es una sinfonía [Yes, teacher, it is a symphony.]  
 T. Right, now let's go on...

In this case, there is no way to know whether students understand what the concept of symphony or *sinfonía* is. Moreover, not only were the teachers using translation as their chief bilingual teaching strategy, they were also encouraging students to do so. I observed students using this type of translation strategy during small group work, especially to learn the Spanish equivalent of certain English words.

When the two teachers started the school year, they talked very openly and strongly about the need to teach "most of the content classes in Spanish" (field notes, 9/92). Their reasoning was that students need to be able to understand the content subject matter and participate more fully when instruction was conducted in a meaningful language. However, by mid-year, they began to sense that their bilingual teaching practices and their views of learning needed revamping. This realization was especially crystallized when the teachers completed the first Stimulated Recall session. What they saw and explained was that they were doing most of the talking, that they used translation as a means to facilitate language comprehension, and that they encouraged students to translate vocabulary in ways that discouraged understanding. They weren't surprised that they did most of the talking, but did appear concerned that they used translation so often. They both realized that concurrent teaching strategies favored English-to-Spanish translation at the word level, and that as a result, students had few opportunities to discuss and develop concepts in two languages.

After the workshops, discussions and practice, data from the second Stimulated Recall sessions revealed two substantial changes: (1) both CT and MB virtually stopped translation from English to Spanish for the purpose of increasing student comprehension, and (2) the teachers distributed to the two languages so that they spent more or less equal

amounts of time in the two languages (as Milk, 1986 found). The teachers remarked that they had also begun to prepare their lessons more carefully that they did before the second phase started. They thought about ways to present ideas, vocabulary, and processes using visuals and other manipulatives. They planned out where in the lesson they would try to speak and interact all in Spanish and where they would try to speak and interact all in English. Instead of asking students for a translation of a word, they would ask for a definition or an application of the concept the word represented.

In terms of the kinds of cues that teachers relied on when making switching decisions, both still mentioned student comprehension, but they talked more about concept understanding than language comprehension. This seemingly minor adjustment had a major influence on the way the teachers used the two languages for instruction. Once concept understanding became the goal, along with language acquisition, the teachers worked very hard to keep students in the language that they were using at any point in the lesson. This had the effect of "pushing" students to communicate ideas in both languages, a goal that Swain (1985) has found to be necessary for language as well as content development. A by-product of this effort was that by the end of the year, students pretty much followed the inertial rule of speaking in the language that the teacher used last, and actually using long stretches of discourse to interact with the teacher and peers. That is, students forced themselves to use whichever language the teacher used with them initially.

### **Conclusion**

The bilingual teachers in this study began the school year in a brand new school long on ideals but short on ways to achieve them. They wanted to learn how to be better teachers, and they still do. They learned that bilingual teaching, especially at the secondary level, requires not only a great deal of pedagogical subject matter knowledge, but also a good understanding of bilingual methodology so that as students develop knowledge, they acquire language as well. The integration of language acquisition principles with content teaching became a conscious issue and task for them. As a result of this year long study, both teachers

realized that they had and continue to have much to learn about bilingual methodology as well as about language acquisition. At the same time, however, they know that they have changed significant aspects of their teaching. Their understanding of bilingual teaching is reflected in the ways that they planned for and interacted with their students by the end of the school year. They came a long way toward becoming better bilingual teachers.

**Author's Note:**

Much of the literature on translation and interpretation uses the former to refer to written text; and the latter, to spoken language. In education contexts, however, translation typically refers to saying something in one language and then repeating it in another language, keeping the meaning intact.

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