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"HOW DID YOU LEARN TO WRITE IN ENGLISH WHEN
YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TAUGHT IN ENGLISH?": THE
LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH IN A DUAL
LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Ellen Riojas Clark
University of Texas-San Antonio

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe a supportive cultural and linguistic environment where students are learning a second language naturally. The classroom described is in a school that proposes to implement a dual language approach. The case study reports on the use of language experience and a natural approach to learning languages in a dual language kindergarten class. The importance of trained bilingual education teachers and of dedicated and committed administrative staff to native language instruction is stressed in the article. Above all, the students' ability and pride in their native language and eagerness to learn English is apparent.

Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to describe a supportive cultural and linguistic environment where students are learning a second language naturally. The classroom described is in a school that proposes to implement a dual language approach. The case study reports on the use of language experience and a natural approach to learning languages in a dual language kindergarten class.

The thrust for this case study came from meeting a principal and some of her teachers who talked about their students' ability and pride in their native language and how they learned English without even trying. As I became interested in learning how this happened, many questions came to mind. What does a teacher do to make this happen? What do children do as they are learning two languages? What does a school do to ensure that children learn in two languages? Why do some children seem to learn another language more readily than other children? How can instruction affect the dual language process? How do the attitudes of teachers affect the learning process?

The effects of dual language programs merit study as does the process of learning in dual languages. Up to now, these factors have not been studied in detail and, therefore, the basic questions of how dual language instruction can promote attainment of literary skills is important.

Background

The community. The W. Velasquez Elementary School (pseudonym) is located in the west side of San Antonio, Texas. Because of its proximity to the downtown area of the city, it has many features which are characteristic of an "inner city school." Many of the students live in the federally-funded housing projects that are close to the school. The rest of the area consists of individual small low-cost housing. The community as a whole is a lower-economic residential area as reflected by a 99% student participation in the free or reduced price lunch program at the school.

Business in the area is limited to a few fast food franchises, small proprietorships dealing in service, and a discount store. Big industry, corporate businesses, and shopping malls are nonexistent. The school community currently has limited recreational facilities for its school youth. The school itself has a basketball court used after school and during the summer; however, there are no organized activities due to the lack of funds for staffing. There is a public branch library in the community that the students use extensively during the school year as well as during the summer months. The community is also served by a Catholic church for religious services. The only public recreational park

in the area has aided in promoting Latino music, dances, concerts and contests, and the celebration of traditional Mexican holidays.

Two Catholic universities are in the immediate surrounding area; however, due to their high tuition rates, few area students attend these institutions. The area students who attend college have to travel out of the area to the state four-year university or to the junior colleges.

The students. The school population comprises 584 students of whom 99% are of Mexican American descent. While most of the families in the area have resided in the area for several generations, there is always a continuous influx of immigrants from Mexico.

As a result of these demographics, the school has a large minority language student population to serve and a very limited tax base to finance its services. Currently, the school suffers from a lack of facilities and is in dire need of additional funds to upgrade the services being provided to its students. The student population of the school district is currently plagued with a dropout rate of close to 60%. Although we often hear of dropout rates in terms of secondary schools, it is also found that many students become "at-risk" while in elementary school. The gaps in achievement levels of these students can be related to their limited English proficiency, to their lack of empowerment, and to their lower socio-economic status, as well as the school district's lack of resources. The school is committed to identifying all students who currently display at-risk academic profiles, and are limited English proficient.

The predominant Latino community is of Mexican origin whose use of the Spanish language is strong and whose Mexican culture is very rich. The language environment consists of families who use only Spanish in the home, some who use only English, while the vast majority uses varying degrees of English and Spanish. This linguistic environment can be seen as a positive factor in developing and implementing extensive bilingual instruction through a dual-language program.

The school. The school houses elementary grades from Pre-K[DRR1] (four-year-old program) through the 6th grade. The curriculum is based on the Texas Basic Curriculum that lists all essential elements to be taught in the different content areas. The school follows state guidelines for bilingual education as carried out by the school district in all of its

campuses. Schools with more than twenty LEP (limited English proficient)[DRR2] students per grade level must provide bilingual education for their students. Therefore, the school offers bilingual education for eligible children Pre-K through 6th grade. The program has a heavy native language emphasis in the early grades with an ESL (English as a Second Language) approach in the later grades.

The district has selected this campus to be a model school with a dual language/developmental program. Bilingual teachers in the school are developing the program with help and support from the school principal, Ms. Socorro (all names are pseudonymous). The principal is very committed to the goals of bilingual education, language maintenance, and the empowerment of students, teachers, and community. Ms. Socorro was a graduate participant in the local state university's Title VII Educational Leadership in Bilingual Education training project. In addition, Ms. Socorro has a Master's degree, is certified in bilingual education and has been a bilingual classroom teacher. She is extremely active in professional organizations on a state and national level, politically active, and very involved in community activities. She supports teachers in site-based management and in the use of innovative practices. As a result, the teachers have formed an informal collaborative group that gets together to discuss curriculum and staff development and learn about new techniques.

The Bilingual Program

The developmental dual language program. The goals of the developmental/dual language program at the W. Velasquez Elementary School were developed by the bilingual teachers during several meetings with this researcher. While teachers are still not sure what name to give to their program, the goals have been informally stated and serve as the premise for program development. They are stated as follows:

All students in the developmental/dual language program will:

1. achieve high levels of proficiency in both L1 and L2;
2. demonstrate academic achievement in both L1 and L2;
3. attain high self-esteem;
4. become empowered and be able to function in a variety of social and academic situations.

The proposed program design has the following features:

- a dual language program Pre K-6th grade;
- a strong home-school collaboration;
- only certified, high quality, committed instructional personnel;
- a whole language, cooperative, thematic approach;
- an additive bilingual environment;
- an equitable ratio of English to Spanish:
 - a. minimum of fifty percent Spanish language instruction
 - b. minimum often percent English for the early grades
- fifty percent English/Spanish for grades 4 - 6
- the premise that a strong first language (oral and written) leads to a strong second language;
- assurance of sufficient time to acquire the classroom language and the academic concepts needed for cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) vs. just the acquisition of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS);
- strong ESL components integrated into the program; and
- promotion of bilingualism and biculturalism as natural resources.

The school has had a bilingual program, but now the dual language approach will emphasize development of both languages throughout all grade levels for all students in all content areas.

Staff. The kindergarten teacher who will be the focus of the case study is Ms. Rosas, a twenty-year veteran of bilingual early childhood programs. Ms. Rosas has been teaching 25 years. Her experience reflects teaching in public and private institutions in rural and urban areas in the United States and in South America. Ms. Rosas was born in South America and is a native Spanish speaker. Her formal education in South America ranges from the elementary schools she attended to the teaching credentials she received from the higher educational system there. Upon coming to the United States, she underwent the certification process in both California and Texas. Within the past eight years, she has received a master of arts degree in bicultural-bilingual education and certification as a bilingual education teacher.

Ms. Rosas has a bilingual paraprofessional, Ms. Guzman, in her classroom on a daily basis. The approach used in the classroom is based

on utilization of cooperative learning, critical thinking techniques, whole language, computer writing, and thematic integrated curriculum.

The classroom is large, airy, comfortable, and very colorful with students' work displayed throughout the room and on the outside walls. The room reflects learning centers such as science, play, reading, housekeeping, math, etc. Several horseshoe tables are set up for group teaching and group work. There are 17 students in the classroom and they have all been identified as LEP based on a home language survey, and the Language Assessment Scales (LAS).^[DRR3] They are all dominant Spanish speakers. The majority are Mexican American with a few children from interracial origins. They are all on the free lunch program and live in the surrounding community. Several recent immigrant children from Mexico are in the classroom. Some children live in single parent homes, others with grandparents or relatives, and some in female-headed families.

Bilingual instruction. The teacher and paraprofessional speak Spanish ninety percent of the time with students during the school day. Content area teaching is conducted in Spanish. The Language Experience Approach is done in Spanish. English is used in some songs, books that the teacher reads and/or translates into Spanish, finger plays, rhymes, some computer programs, Sesame Street^[DRR4] TV programs, and in TPR (Total Physical Response) type games. The children use Spanish in play, group work, writing, outside of the classroom and with the teachers. The students are also exposed to English outside of the classroom through environmental print by the mass media, food and toy packaging, billboards, street signs, and by some English speaking peers and neighborhood playmates.

The classroom schedule in the morning consists of reading, writing, learning centers, and computer time. The children are divided into groups and follow a rotation schedule with the teacher, the paraprofessional, and the learning centers. Lunch is followed by a rest period. The afternoon consists of art projects, structured games, music, and reading.

The Case Study

Method. The author visited the classroom weekly throughout the school year. Observations, recording of interactions, interviews and collection of materials were part of the data collection process. Detailed notes were taken during the classroom observations of the students' interaction with the staff, each other, and in their program of study. Transcriptions of the social and academic interactions of the students and teacher in the classrooms were made. Writing samples, as well as other classroom products were collected. The focus of the study was to view the process of first and second language development in the classroom. Students were observed throughout their classroom schedule. The observations reported in this article are "snapshots" of two days - one in the early spring and the other close to the end of the semester. The scenes presented give the reader a sense of language use in the process of literacy development in the first and second language.

Scenes from a dual language experience classroom. Following are the author's observations of the classroom.

Group A: Some of the students are involved in different centers in the classroom.

Group B: Ms. Guzman is helping seven students with art work that will accompany the language experience story which they will later write, on the importance of school. She directs students to draw their school on top of the sheet of paper that she has divided with a line. The students are to write their name, date, and the school name on the top. Violeta goes to Ms. Guzman to ask for a specific book to help with her drawing. Other students are busy drawing and talking in Spanish to each other. Most of the children are drawing what looks like a school on a corner of the paper, and then drawing what they do in school.

Group C: Six students are working with Ms. Rosas at a table. They have self-selected library books that they are reading individually--in some cases they are making up a story as they are looking at the pictures. Some books are in English and others in Spanish but they are "reading" in Spanish.

Ms. Rosas is doing language experience stories with the students on a one-to-one basis. Each story begins with, "*Es importante venir a la escuela...*" (It is important to come to school). The following is a

transcript of two students' interaction. The first line indicates the students' oral account that has been written down by the teacher, the word in bold is the English used by the student, and the second line in smaller type in parentheses is the author's translation:

Maribel: *...a jugar, pintar, estudia; y para aprender. Y a trabajar.*
(to play, paint, study, and to learn. And to work).

Alfredo: *...para ser bombero, mi **work**. Porque yo voy a ser*
(to be a fireman, my work. Because I am going to be a)

***fireman**. Yo me subo en los **roofs** y les pongo agua. Yo tengo*
(fireman. I will get on the roof and I'll put water on them. I have)

una hacha y la uso para apagar la lumbre.
(an ax and I'll use it to put out the fire.)

Children are relating their ideas of jobs/careers/work in relationship to school and their function as students. They have learned songs about different professions in English and Ms. Rosas has read books to them in English about careers and jobs. She explains the content and discusses in Spanish with the children. Mrs. Rosas uses English in this natural way to teach specific English vocabulary.

Upon rising, the children put their things away without any direction from the teacher. As they prepare to go to the computer room, they discuss among themselves what they will be doing as they continue their literacy activities in the computer lab. The computer room has about twelve computers with the *Writing to Read* IBM program.

Scene in the Computer Room.

Group A: Two students are listening to a tape and filling in missing letters on a worksheet.

Group B: Four students are working with some black and white letter tiles and are forming words either in English or Spanish with the help of the teacher.

Group C: Twelve students are working on the computers writing stories or letters. Juan is writing a thank you letter in Spanish to a professor who visited their classroom and read to them. He talks out loud as he writes. He sounds out the words as he searches for the letters and then types them. The words in italics are the ones he has written; the words in parentheses are a translation of the sounds and words he is saying as he types. Directly below is the English translation in smaller type.

Juan: *yo tecro dr. C. y quiero que vegas a al esquely que los leas*

I love you Dr. C. and I want you to come to the school and read to us.

[he is saying "a la escuela" out loud, drawing the word out as he types it on the computer] (a la uuu Es cue cue uu Es cue a).

otro libro para que leas otro libro

(o otro ot otro liii liBro libro bro)

another book so that you can read us another book

para aprende a leer,

(para para ra a pr apra apre per apr apr aprender d der der aprender aprendr a le e le e le e e rr e r para e para a leer para leer para aprender)

so that we can learn

paradr luego nosotros pa pendo no y

(luego nos nos nos o otro otros ya ya pe demo pen demo demo predemo y y)

so that then we can learn and

calori calari este if nto se a ca va do y fi fi fin

(colorin, colorin, colo ra ra ra cololo dro este este colorin, colorado este cuento se ha ha a ca acabo).

color, color, red this story is now finished and the end. [A typical rhyme that is added in Spanish upon ending a story.]

This is an example of how some children are writing in the computer lab during early spring. Like Juan, many children are writing phonetically in Spanish; that is, they are writing what they are saying or, in other words, doing inventive spelling. The children are sounding out the words and searching for the letter on the keyboard that they feel approximates the relationship between sound and literal symbol. They write so that they can read it back, which is what they did with the author, the teacher, and their peers.

The children's use of inventive spelling in their first language is developmentally appropriate. That is, children learning to write use inventive spelling. According to Genishi and Dyson, "children base these spellings on their current hypotheses about how our alphabetic writing system works" (1989, p. 226). In their discussion about why spelling is difficult for children, they state that the difficulty in "grasping the phoneme-grapheme relationship" leads to inventive spelling (1989, p. 222). Young children's writing reflects either the over generalization of patterns or the use of phonetic analysis in beginning writing (Forester,

1980; Read, 1971). Juan's writing reflects both of these aspects as he sounds out the words. His thinking is reflected in his talking as he is literally doing a phonetic analysis of the words he is writing.

Another student, Maribel S., is writing in Spanish fluidly without sounding out the words. She composes two to three letters while most of the others are working on one letter.

Maribel S. (3/7)

yo teqero mucho poqe vas par la esoscla

(I love you very much because you go to school)

y los ayoudas a trabajar

(and you help us work)

y teqero mucho y tu los qeres mucho Dotora clark

(and I love you very much and you love us very much, Doctor clark)

nuca teovides dnosostos fin

(never forget us the end)

Maribel's letter written in March is in a flowery Spanish style. Her closing is reminiscent of a formal use of Spanish. The appropriate use of Spanish letter writing style reflects her understanding of the cultural component of this genre. She apparently has had exposure to this Spanish style in speech and in reading and/or writing of letters. For example, the expressions of gratitude for assistance is reflective of her cultural background. The effusive use of speech might sound affected in English, yet is natural in Spanish. The manner in which she begins and ends her letter is typical of writing in Spanish.

She has not attempted to write any compositions in English at this point except for the drawing of a school she makes on the letter after it has been printed. The drawing on this letter indicates the first word written in English. The words she hand prints at the top of the figure of the school is "dis ". She explains to me in Spanish that at the front of the school up above the door it says "school," therefore, di (the) 5 (school). This is an example of how she overgeneralizes in English.

Maribel has a larger vocabulary in her writing than Juan. Her writing reflects more correctly spelled words in Spanish but yet, she also uses inventive spelling. She hums as she writes, quite happy with her time on the computer. The only time she seeks assistance, is when she asks Ms. Rosas how to spell the names of the other two people to whom

she is writing. She happily shares her writing with the students sitting on either side, with the teacher, with the paraprofessional, and with the author.

Two months later during computer time, two girls ask Ms. Rosas how to spell "Happy Birthday" so that they can write to the librarian on her birthday. Ms. Rosas complies by writing the English phrase on a sentence strip. Several children decide to write her letters in English. Ms. Rosas supplies the excited children with the sentence strips.

Maribel S. (5/6)
 Mrs. Bradley Happy Birthday to you
 [copied off of a sentence strip]
'ay lav yu becas yu leras teicas
 I love you because you let us take
bucs end yu riras birfas bec ai laf
 books and you read us pretty books I love
da buc taqu tu riras laras buc
 the books thank you to read us books
an es panes ai lavet ad bucs
 in Spanish I love the books
ar buri bucs a ticher ai lavu
 are pretty books. Teacher I love you
a lava es pechili Ms. M an yu
 and I love especially Ms. Rosas and you
Ms. bradley don for gami bay
 Mrs. Bradley don't forget me
 dan ades tori
 the end of story.

Barely two months later, Maribel is now writing in English. Maribel adapts her Spanish writing style to English and includes her formal closing, but this time in English. Ms. Bradley is a monolingual English speaker who always welcomes the children to the library and helps them to find books. By this time of the year, some children are interacting with her in Spanish as she speaks to them in English, thereby, indicating enough English comprehension by the students to carry on a dual language conversation.

Elizabeth M. also writes her first letter in English. The two girls enunciate words softly to themselves as they type their letters.

Elizabeth M (5/6)

I love you ms. Bradley bcas you

I love you Ms. Bradley because you

reras bucs llas da mandaes you r a

read us books just the Mondays you are

gud prsan an you gf gat bucs an you

good person and you have books and

len ds bucs so we cut lrn to rit bus

lends us books so we could learn to read book

an act rit sam bcsto Ms. Bradley

and I could read some books to Ms. Bradley

happy birthday ms. Bradley

Happy birthday Ms. Bradley

Ms. Rosas praises the children for their work. She gathers all the birthday letters, some written in Spanish and others in English, to send them to the librarian. Sarah Hudelson (1989) reported on a whole language instructional program and described the impact individual differences of bilingual children had on their writing development. She concluded that the manifestation of children's different personalities affects how second language literacy occurs. Upon reflecting on the three students and their writing examples, it is likely that their acquisition of oral English and writing in English has been impacted differently by their personalities. Maribel seems to be a risk taker; Elizabeth, her friend, tries to keep up with her, and Juan is reserved.

Discussion

A natural way to English. The children in Ms. Rosas' room are learning English in a natural way. They are hearing English in the school, although their classroom was initially 90 percent in Spanish. By the end of the year, Ms. Rosas is using English about 20 percent of the time through more songs, books, and games. The increase in English usage by the teacher is planned and reflective of the program intent. Content is still in Spanish. The level of instruction presented in the classroom and the tasks required of the children demand critical thought, which is exhibited through their thinking aloud in their native language. The children are carrying on conversations in Spanish with

their peers that shows use of higher level cognitive academic vocabulary.

Language experience in a dual language classroom. The children are now writing extensively in Spanish by the end of the year. Their use of Spanish style is becoming more evident, as is their vocabulary. Their writing in English is by choice, even though there has not been a concentrated effort to teach English and their writing contains inventive spelling. Edelsky and Jilbert (1985) found that children apply their knowledge of spelling in Spanish to spelling in English until they learn phonic generalizations. Nathenson-Mejia (1989) noted that children when spelling show they are using their first language knowledge and then applying it to their spelling in English.

According to Genishi and Dyson, for children, "becoming able to use written language for different social purposes is part of becoming communicatively competent" (1989, p. 235). As the end of the school year came near, the salutations and closings of the children's letters start to reflect an English writing style that is less flowery. Clearly, the oral English comprehension of the students has improved as they carry out their Spanish interactions with English monolingual speakers and they are becoming more communicatively competent in their writing. The children are also learning to read by writing. They are now connecting print to meaning. All this became evident in the time frame of a few months.

Critical comments about the dual language program development.

(1) *Instruction:* The philosophy of this classroom is that children learn by doing, that is, they learn to read by reading and to write by writing. The teacher encourages inventive spelling and the thinking outloud process as they write. The value of thinking outloud while writing is a process of reasoning from the first language to the second language (Cumming, 1990). In this sense, the teacher is encouraging higher order thinking skills by encouraging the process of thinking outloud.

Students are encouraged to write on the computer and they go to the computer room almost daily. Van Haalen (1990) in a pilot study found that bilingual students used more strategies in their writing when they used word processors. The observations indicate the process of thinking outloud was facilitated by the search for the letters on the keyboard that

would fit the sounds of the words being spelled. The thinking outloud process also provides introspective information as to what strategies children are using in the process. That is, one can actively hear how children are processing information, how they are activating prior knowledge, how they are connecting prior knowledge to new information.

Throughout the day, the children practice reading outloud what they write when they read to each other, to the teacher, to the paraprofessional, to the principal, to the janitor, to whomever comes across their path, and, of course, to their parents. Children who are proficient in their first language seem to understand the function of writing and are able to extend this to writing in their second language (Peregoy and Boyle, 1993). It is obvious the children enjoy writing as well as reading their writing. The sharing of writing and reading in either language is highly encouraged by the teacher.

The teacher is building on the different experiential backgrounds and strengths as she develops their academic skills. By validating the prior knowledge of the students, she sets the stage for them to be able to scaffold from their knowledge base. The principles of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development are evident in the classroom instruction and methodology employed by the teacher. Social interaction, children's experiences, their way of thinking, and their prior knowledge form the core for learning in the classroom. She also knows first and second language theory and has, thus, developed her instruction and curriculum. She provides her students with opportunities for higher-level thinking and problem solving in their first language. The development of cognitive academic vocabulary in the first language is viewed as important for the acquisition of English. All in all, the teacher is highly competent and well trained.

More importantly, Ms. Rosas views her students as coming from rich environments, thereby recognizing their language, their culture, and their experiences as important. She expands their use of Spanish and their view of a common Hispanic heritage. Therefore, her students learn to engage in complex social and academic interactions in two languages demonstrated by their oral, reading and writing proficiencies. This successful classroom is one that can be replicated in many more contexts. The factors that lead to this success are those of a

committed and well trained teacher, solid administrative support, and a sound philosophical and theoretical base for bilingual education.

(2) *Program development*: One of the aspects that will help the dual language program become a reality is the commitment of the principal and teachers to bilingual education. The teachers recognized the need for professional development. As a result, a collaborative bilingual teachers' learning community that included the principal and the university researcher was formed at the school. The group decided to study and carry out cooperative learning at the school and to concentrate on a dual language approach at the school. The group studied the work of Cummins (1984), his framework for empowering language minority students, and the additive bilingualism enrichment principle. Teachers saw the importance of developing native language proficiency early in order to avoid negative effects on cognitive growth and to facilitate the second language. In order for the positive effects to manifest themselves, teachers noted that dual language programs must address the issue of concentrated and comprehensive programs. They addressed the issue of the five to seven year time span needed for developing both languages. Teachers were also aware of Cummins' (1989) premise that literacy instruction in the first language is effective for promoting second language literacy proficiency and transfer to the second language. They understood the comprehensible input model (Krashen and Biber, 1988); that is, background knowledge learned in the primary language is important for the acquisition of the second language. The teachers, then, are committed to the principle that concepts learned in the first language by language minority students in dual language programs will facilitate the acquisition of subject area content in English. Again, the acknowledgment by the staff that professional growth has to continue is a factor that impacts programs favorably. These, of course, are elements that will affect the dual language program in a positive manner.

Unfortunately, what did not affect the program favorably was the eventual lack of district commitment to the dual language program. The district encouraged the school to write a grant which, unfortunately, was not funded. The level of support was based upon the school finding funding for the program. Assistance for staff development was not provided. The bilingual director for the district seemed to dedicate her time, staff and funds to other areas. The school was left to pursue the

concept on its own. Fortunately for the school, the community and for the students, Ms. Rosas, other teachers like her, and the principal are still pursuing their goal of good bilingual education.

Conclusion

This research study underscores the need for further investigation of what affects the learning process of bilingual students and how bilingual students learn. The role of teacher attitudes toward bilingual learners and the effect of these attitudes on their learning also merits study. There is a paucity of research in this area - the learning process of bilingual students, the effects of attitudes on learning by bilingual students, and the critical thinking processes of bilingual students in dual language situations. The other issues that are indirectly raised by this study are: areas of content for bilingual education teacher training programs; the policy issues regarding dual language programs; implementation of dual language programs by school districts; and, the structuring of dual language programs that reflect true community and school collaboration and commitment. A fundamental question also raised by this study is, How can success in individual classrooms be translated into successful outcomes for all students at the end of the bilingual education program?

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