Developing emergent biliteracy:
Guiding principles for instruction*

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Abstract

We are advocating for the adoption of simultaneous emerging biliteracy programs in binational / bilingual schools in Colombia. The adoption of such programs has an influence on teacher education institutions across the country. We must prepare teachers to respond the technological era of the twenty-first century in which information is accessible in different languages at the touch of a button. In this article, we present five principles for emergent biliteracy instruction. After providing these principles, we offer implications for teacher educators and prospective teachers.

Key Words: Biliteracy Programs, Teacher Education, Prospective Teachers

Resumen

Estamos a favor de la adopción de programas donde se desarrolle simultáneamente la lectura y la escritura en dos lenguas en colegios bilingües colombianos. La adopción de dichos programas tiene impacto en instituciones encargadas de la formación docente en el país. Es nuestra responsabilidad formar maestros capaces de responder a las exigencias de la era tecnológica del siglo veintiuno en la cual la información es accesible en diferentes idiomas con una rapidez abismal. En este artículo presentamos cinco principios relacionados con la enseñanza de la lectura y escritura en dos lenguas. Finalmente se mencionan las implicaciones de dichos principios tanto para formadores de maestros como para futuros docentes.

Palabras Claves: Programas de lectura y escritura en dos lenguas, Formación de docentes, Futuros docentes

Introduction

In some schools in Colombia, teachers have the challenging and complex task in helping students acquire literacy in two languages within the context of bilingual education programs. In actuality, this is a common practice in schools that implement a variety of programs that utilize two languages of instruction (Genesee, 1987; Peal & Lambert, 1962; Swain & Lapkin, 1982). In this article, we argue that students in binational (international) schools in Colombia should be exposed to a variety of literacy experiences since the first day of school in both their native and their second language.

Although a number of research studies (Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Thomas & Collier, 1997) suggest that for students acquiring English as a second language, literacy instruction should be first in the native language, one must be cautious in interpolating these findings into contexts outside the United States. The main reason for this being that most of the bilingual programs in the United States are transitional bilingual programs. The goal of transitional bilingual programs is to transition students into all English classes as quickly as possible (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). Furthermore, the majority language outside the schools is English and the native languages of second language learners in the United States are seldom valued or supported.

In contrast, the linguistic situation in binational schools in Colombia is quite different. Binational schools in Colombia (e.g., Colegio Nueva Granada, Colegio Los Nogales, Colegio San Carlos in Bogotá; Colegio Panamericano in Bucaramanga; Colegio Karl Parrish in Barranquilla; Colegio George Washington in Cartagena; Colegio Albania in La Guajira; Colegio Bolivar in Cali; Liceo Inglés in Pereira; Gimnasio Inglés in Armenia; Colegio Granadino in Manizales; The Columbus School in Medellín) provide a particular type of program referred to as 'elite' bilingual education, which serves mainly children of upper-class, professional parents (de Mejia, 2002). In fact, Heller (1994) argues that these immersion schools provide students with linguistic and cultural capital for increased social and economic mobility. Many Colombian parents invest in this type of education to gain advantages at various levels (e.g., educational, cultural, linguistic, social, power, wealth). In fact, many of these schools (e.g., Colegio Panamericano, The Columbus School, Gimnasio Inglés) are parent-owned schools, which were created as a response to the

educational needs for today's global society. The main goal of these binational schools is for full bilingualism and biliteracy in Spanish and a prestige language (e.g., English, German, French, Italian); thus, creating elite bilinguals. Elite bilinguals are those who freely chose to become bilinguals (Romaine, 1999), such as Colombian highly educated, high socio-economic status parents who decide to educate their children bilingually in the context of bilingual schools. Romaine adds that bilingual education programs work best when is optional and not enforced (1999). Moreover, there is a conviction from binational schools and parents that child bilingualism is positive, and the children's home language (Spanish) and culture (Colombian) is valued and respected.

Baker & Prys Jones (1997) refer to these types of schools as international schools. In international schools, students learn a majority language with international prestige (e.g., English, French, German). This prestige of the foreign language is used as a medium to teach part of the curriculum and also taught as a language. In actuality, binational schools in Colombia develop and reinforce the native language, Spanish, while introducing a foreign language (e.g., English, French, German, Italian); thus, creating an additive bilingual context. Lambert (1977) explains that additive bilingualism refers to the situation where the native language is dominant and prestigious and not in danger of being replaced by the second or foreign language. In fact, Valdés & Figueroa claim that additive bilingualism is an enrichment process through which learners acquire a second language with no fear of native language loss or abandonment of their own cultural identity and values.

The goals of binational schools in Colombia (in terms of language learning) are to become competent to speak, read and write in two prestigious languages, and to appreciate the traditions and culture of the home country and of the country of the target language (e.g., The United States, England, France, Germany). In short, these binational schools want their students to become bilingual and bicultural without loss of educational achievement. Therefore, their curriculum tends to reflect both the curriculum of both countries. In the case of many binational schools in Colombia (e.g., Colegio Panamericano, The Columbus Schools, Colegio Granadino), their programs fulfill both Colombian governmental requirements (National Ministry of Education, MEN) and U.S. accreditation standards (e.g., Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, SACS). In fact, many of these schools (e.g., Colegio Panamericano, The British School) prepare their students for American tests

or British examinations. One of their aims is to prepare students to study in Colombian and/or foreign universities. But binational schools in Colombia are not limited to teaching English and American or British culture. For example, there are also German (e.g., Colegio Andino), French (e.g., Liceo Francés Louis Pasteur), Italian (e.g., Colegio Italiano Leonardo da Vinci) and Hebrew (e.g., Colegio Colombo Hebreo) schools in Colombia. There are also multilingual schools (e.g., Colegio Helvetia).

In a way, we could compare binational schools in Colombia to the immersion programs in French and English in Canada (Genesee, 1991; Lambert, 1980; Swain & Lapkin, 1991). Immersion bilingual education derived from Canadian educational experiments (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). This type of bilingual program supports the views that bilingualism fosters intellectual development and academic achievement (Romaine, 1996). The educational aim of immersion is enrichment of language skills and the desired outcome is additive bilingualism, where the addition of a second language and culture is unlikely to replace or displace the first language and culture (Lambert, 1980). In addition, parents recognize the value of knowing a prestige language (Peal & Lambert, 1972). In fact, biliteracy in French and English is encouraged and enabled (Swain & Lapkin, 1982). Moreover, the Canadian immersion model has proved to be successful and showed that for these elite bilinguals, initial literacy in the target language (French) did not negatively affect English language literacy (Genesee, 1983). For instance, Lambert & Tucker found that students in early total immersion were able to read, write, speak, and understand in both languages (1972).

Similarly, among Colombia's elite, bilingualism is closely associated with academic and economic success. Canadian immersion programs showed that the acquisition of content is not impaired and competence in the second language is far better than is usually achieved by students in second language courses (Genesee, 1978). Similarly, Valdés & Figueroa claim that additive bilingual contexts are associated with high levels of proficiency in both languages and higher levels of scholastic performance (1994). This also happens to be true in Colombia, where the majority of the binational schools are highly ranked according to the ICFES exam. For instance, the top five school according to the 2001 ICFES exam were binational schools (Colegio Los Nogales, Colegio San Carlos, Colegio San Jorge de Inglaterra, Liceo Frances de Pereira, and Liceo Frances Louis Pasteur). Similarly, another

bilingual school was ranked number one in the nation according to the 2002 ICFES exam (Colegio La Quinta del Puente en Floridablanca, Santander).

Similarly, through application of an immersion program of instruction in two prestigious languages, where there is no danger of the first language being replaced by the second language, students become literate through parallel language and literacy experiences. As we mentioned above, this is the case in Canada, with Anglophone children becoming literate in French (Kendall, Lajeunesse, Chmilar, Shapson & Shapson, 1987). A key factor in effective bilingual programs for English-language learners is that literacy in the students' native language is valued in and of itself and that biliteracy is developed (Au, 1998). Students in such bilingual programs will maintain and refine their native language literacy skills throughout their schooling. This happens to be the case in binational schools in Colombia where students benefit from having several academic courses in Spanish. With some exceptions, the home language of the majority of the students in binational schools in Colombia is Spanish. Spanish is also the majority language of the community and it is valued everywhere in the country. Consequently, Spanish is a very prestigious language in Colombia. Moreover, for the most part, Colombian binational schools do not have transitional bilingual programs where students are never transitioned into all English classrooms.

This article consists of three major parts. In the first part, we described the theoretical and conceptual goals of emergent simultaneous biliteracy within the context of bilingual programs in binational schools in Colombia. In the second one, we put forward five principles for biliteracy instruction. Finally, we will try to show that these principles have an effect on teacher education programs in Colombia for they have to prepare prospective teachers to be effective biliteracy teachers.

Theoretical background

Literacy is often viewed as simply the ability to read and write (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). But in reality, literacy is more than reading and writing. For instance, several studies have shown that there is a strong connection between oral language and reading (Cazden, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In actuality, literacy learning involves all elements of the communication process: reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and thinking. Quite simply,

children develop their ability to construct meaning by having meaningful literacy experiences, which might include sharing books or sitting with their parents making a grocery list. For example, Heath pointed out in her study that literacy in the real world involves such things as reading signs, advertisements, and bumper stickers; writing letters, reading newspapers and magazines; and giving oral and written messages to others or leaving them for oneself (1983). Moreover, in today's computerized world, literacy also involves communicating through technology (Thornburg, 1992). For instance, a lot of the students in binational schools in Colombian have access to the internet, e-mail accounts, chat systems, digital organizers, cell phones, and video and computer games.

On the other hand, emergent literacy is the idea that children grow into reading and writing with no real beginning or ending point, that reading and writing develop concurrently, interrelatedly, and according to no one right sequence, or order (Clay, 1991; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Instead, learners are always emerging. Furthermore, this process begins long before children enter school, through the activities and experiences in their daily lives and through their interactions with peers and adults (Goodman, 1986; Heath, 1983). Teale & Sulzby (1986) argue that most preschool-age children cannot read and write in the conventional sense, and their attempts at reading and writing show steady development during this stage. Teale & Sulzby explain that the emergent literacy perspective, which emanated from cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, takes a broader view of literacy and examines children's literacy development before the onset of formal instruction (1986). In the next section, we present five guiding principles to support emergent biliteracy in Colombian binational schools.

Guiding principles for biliteracy instruction

The discussion in the previous section points to the need to reexamine and expand previous beliefs that second language learners in bilingual schools need to initially develop literacy in the native language before developing literacy skills in the second language in contexts where both languages are valued and supported. We argue that in today's global context, a prestigious language like English is recognized as a language of power (Fairclough, 1989). English, for example, is a source of global information and communication

through avenues such as educational institutions, information technologies and the media. Additionally, a prestige language like English also provides access to scope in employment and further education. Heller (1994) points out that immersion education will produce elite groups of children with bilingual abilities and advantage in educational and job markets. Consequently, young children will benefit if they are exposed to meaningful literacy experiences in two languages since the first day of school. Corson (1990) claims that one advantage of early immersion programs is that they allow a relatively homogenous language classroom, where children will start from the same point. A classroom like this will allow children to grow in the foreign language under a shared teaching and learning approach. Similarly, Canadian studies pointed to the beneficial effects of knowing two languages and how literacy development in the first language was positively correlated with literacy development in the second language (Genesee, 1991). Therefore, we feel that teacher education institutions preparing prospective language teachers need to emphasize the following five principles in their training programs.

1. Adopt a balanced approach to literacy instruction

Research suggests that there is no one way to think about literacy learning. A balanced approach is needed, using a combination of direct instruction and authentic reading and writing experiences to teach children to be literate in two languages (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). We recommend the use of thematic instruction to promote language development (Enright & McCloskey, 1998). Thematic instruction lends itself to virtually any content and any grade level (e.g., animals, colors, toys). Moreover, thematic instruction provides meaning and purpose, builds on prior experiences, integrates opportunities to use oral and written language for learning purposes, promotes collaboration, and provides a lot of variety. The meaningful context established by the theme supports the comprehensibility of instruction, thereby increasing both content learning and second language acquisition (Genesee, 1991).

From the beginning of school, children participate in genuine reading and writing activities in ways that help them not only to be able to read and write but also to want to read and write as they go through life (Martinez & Teale, 1993). An important part of the instruction in a balanced literacy program is to use different types of reading and writing activities to scaffold

the support that students need. For example, teachers need to read aloud to students every day to expose them to a variety of genres (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Similarly, through shared reading and writing experiences, teachers model literacy and allow students to begin to understand the literacy process (Holdaway, 1979). Additionally, by participating in interactive reading and writing activities students and teachers are encouraged to read and write together and in the process, children are also encouraged to do it alone (Tierney, Readence & Dishner, 1990). Guided reading and writing, on the other hand, reinforce skills, allow students to practice and build independence (Fountas & Pinnel, 1996). Finally, independent reading and writing gives students the opportunity to practice their independent level and will demonstrate them the value of literacy (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). In actuality, teachers need to immerse students in an array of rich literacy experiences in the two languages.

2. Promote literacy as a social process

As described earlier, the process of acquiring language is continuous and unending; each of us continues to acquire new aspects of language through our interactions and experiences. Therefore, language acquisition is first and foremost a social process (Cook-Gumprez, 1986). People use language, and literacy for that matter, for a wide variety of purposes, for a wide variety of audiences, and in a wide variety of situations (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). In broad terms, we view literacy simply as communicating in real-world situations.

In fact, literacy develops from real life situations in which reading and writing are used to accomplish a goal. Thus, function precedes form. The vast majority of the literacy experiences that young children go through are embedded in some activity that usually goes beyond the goal of literacy itself. Literacy should always be functional, meaningful and authentic.

3. Capitalize on children's knowledge

Since there is a strong connection between oral language and reading and writing (Cazden, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), it is important that schools build literacy experiences around whatever language a child has developed. In fact, literacy is a process in which students construct meaning based on their prior knowledge of language, themselves and the world. Effective literacy programs must incorporate instructional procedures that

help students activate, or develop and relate, their experiences to what they read and write. Although each student constructs his or her own learning, teachers play a significant role in the literacy learning situations of all their students. Teachers need to make sure that the input is comprehensible and meaningful and thus more accessible to the students for intake. The best way to do this is to make certain that students make connections between what they are currently learning and what they already know. But, above all, teachers should maintain high expectations for all students and provide meaningful opportunities for active learning and intellectually challenging experiences.

4. Use meaningful texts

Students develop literacy as they encounter many authentic, or real, literacy experiences in which they are able to approximate the real tasks of literacy (Cambourne, 1988). By meaningful texts, we mean texts that children themselves find meaningful. For instance, texts which children own and bring to school, texts that are appealing to them for a variety of different reasons or texts that they have written or co-written during shared, interactive, guided and independent writing. Teachers need to provide children with of all kinds of texts and with rich resources for learning to read and write. By using meaningful or authentic texts, and real literature experiences, students will be motivated, captivated and engaged. In fact, authentic texts provide students with a natural base for developing and expanding all their languages.

5. Focus on meaning

Literacy is much more than applying isolated skills. In school-based settings, however, students spend more time on learning isolated literacy skills than on learning the types of literacy skills they are likely to use in real life (Guthrie & Greaney, 1991). Real literacy experiences require understanding, and this understanding is based on prior knowledge. Teachers need to help their students construct meaning by helping them to focus on the relevant features of a text and to relate those features to their previous experiences. Furthermore, comprehension is a process by which the reader constructs or assigns meaning by interacting with the text (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). But it is important to always remember that constructing meaning is a personal process. Therefore, the way children interpret texts varies according to their own experiences. Finally, reading and writing are both constructive processes that

are mutually supportive (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). As we stated in the previous principle, children's first attempts at writing also become their first texts (e.g., their names, their drawings, their stories).

Implications for teaching

The five guiding principles presented in the previous section form the basis for all of the ideas for developing emergent biliteracy. To prepare teachers to be successful with second language learners, teacher educators must help prospective teachers recognize the characteristics of effective biliteracy instruction and guide their thinking about emergent biliteracy development. Some of the characteristics of effective biliteracy teachers include:

1. Effective teachers are knowledgeable about children and early literacy.

The theories of Piaget and Vygotsky were instrumental in understanding the developmental processes that children experience in learning. Similarly, there are developmental stages in a child's reading acquisition and developmental stages in a child's writing growth (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). The development of literacy is a gradual process and will take place over time. Teachers need to understand that as young children learn to speak, listen, read and write, they typically go through several stages in emergent and early literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Moreover, reading and writing develop concurrently and interrelatedly in young children. Teachers also need to realize that writing is actually an easier first learning activity than reading is. Additionally, although there are universals to literacy instruction, teachers need to understand that there are differences between reading a first and a second or foreign language (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Hornberger, 1994; Reyes, 1992).

2. Effective teachers are sensitive to individual differences.

The best way to teach is to individualize instruction. But individualizing instruction does not necessarily require one-to-one teaching. Rather, effective teachers individualize instruction by providing a good match between the student's level and task demands. The key is to plan open-ended activities that provide many different alternatives that will meet each student's needs. In this way, the same activity can range from simple to complex, and every student can experience success at varying levels. As language is acquired,

literacy in the new language develops. Just as each individual acquires the first language at his or her own pace, English learners also acquire their new language at individual rates (Thomas & Collier, 1997). Similarly, use different approaches and ways to expose students to rich variety of literacy experiences. Finally, capitalize on your students' world by taking advantage of their prior knowledge and backgrounds.

3. Effective teachers promote children's literacy experiences at home.

Research suggests that parents and families exert a powerful influence on emergent literacy. It is very important that teachers establish a partnership with parents. This partnership or connection should be genuine and respectful in which both parents and teachers are equal partners. In fact, teachers should empower parents and view them as the experts on the children they are educating. This automatically creates a two way communication process in which parent's voices are invited into the classroom (Ada, 1993). In order to really establish a successful emergent biliteracy program in binational schools, parents also need to expose their child to meaningful literacy experiences at home. But teachers must accept different forms and levels of parental involvement. For example, parents can engage their children in literacy experiences in Spanish, in the target language or in both languages if possible. Parents could also provide them with a variety of literary texts (in any language). Furthermore, a very common practice in Colombia is for parents to hire a tutor to support their children's schooling. Parents are very enthusiastic about helping their children become bilingual and biliterate and will make a lot of sacrifices in order to achieve this. The bottom line here is to inform the parents about the goals of the biliteracy program and the importance of engaging the children in multiple literacy experiences (in any language) at home and in the community.

4. Effective teachers are responsive to children's needs.

Earlier we talked about individualizing instruction. One of the best ways to do this is by constantly assessing your students' strengths and weaknesses. There should always be a direct connection between instruction and assessment. Assessment should show you what each child can and cannot do, and then you plan your instruction in response to each child's situation. Genesee & Hamayan (1994) argue that assessment instruments need to go much further

than tests of inauthentic, decomposed language skills. Actually, they need to collect information about the performance of students that may give a much fuller understanding of the children's strengths and weaknesses. Although there are several tests or inventories that could be used to assess emergent biliteracy (e.g., Clay, 1993), the best way to assess emergent biliteracy is by just observing the children involved in authentic literacy activities. Ideally, students should be assessed in both languages, but make sure that you have appropriate measures in both languages. Using translated versions could be troublesome because translated versions are not always necessarily valid measures (López, 2002). Finally, teachers must ensure that the assessment procedures are informative and conducted on a regular basis to determine the literacy behaviors of each child and to plan the instruction accordingly.

5. Effective teachers nurture a supportive learning climate.

Finally, teachers need to create a climate that is non-threatening; meaning that children feel safe and are willing to take risks. Similarly, teachers need to promote a lot of cooperation and collaboration between the teacher and the students and among the students themselves. Cooperative learning consists of a myriad of teaching strategies that develop social and academic communication skills (Calderón, Tinajero & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1992). Increasing group and collaborative learning is also seen as important in developing the productive language proficiency of children (Swain, 1993). As we stated earlier, literacy should be viewed as a social process where there is a real purpose for using literacy as a communicative device. The goal should be to truly make classrooms a community of readers and writers. In fact, current research suggests that a second language is acquired most effectively in highly interactive and total communicative environments. Finally, teachers need to create a language-rich environment that gives students a chance to engage in meaningful activities. For example, there should be a lot of environmental print in the classrooms and school-wide in both languages.

Summary

As we argued at the beginning of this article, binational schools in Colombia should immerse preschool students in meaningful literacy experiences in two languages since the first day of school. These schools should take advantage of all their resources at hand. For example, most of these schools have a

mixture of native Spanish-speaking teachers, bilingual teachers and native English-speaking teachers (e.g., Colegio Panamericano in Bucaramanga has a plentiful supply of Canadian and American trained teachers) and the support of the parents at home. This unique situation lends itself to create an environment in which children will have authentic and meaningful literacy experiences in two different languages. In the long run, these early literacy experiences in two languages will help students not only to acquire literacy skills in two languages, but also to acquire the second language. Moreover, parents view childhood bilingualism as an investment in their children's future. They also believe that language acquisition in childhood is easy and they expect their child to acquire native-like proficiency.

But above all, the most important goals of emergent biliteracy programs are to foster young children's abilities to make sense out of print and to motivate them to want to read in two languages. Simply put, readers and writers become readers and writers by reading and writing. Ultimately, the goal of emergent biliteracy programs is to provide authentic and meaningful opportunities for children to participate fully in multiple literacy experiences in two languages. We invite teacher education programs in Colombia to prepare prospective language teachers for this challenging task.

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