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When Learners Speak Two or More Languages
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Effective implementation of research-based instructional practices for learners who speak two or more languages requires that we understand who our bilingual learners are, and that we differentiate amongst practices found to be effective for these students. Historically, pedagogies designed for bilingual learners were predicated upon the idea that it was advantageous to develop one language in isolation of another. Additionally, research practices found to be effective with one population were assumed to be effective with all populations. As we will outline below, such practices rely upon faulty premises that should be reshaped into more robust and appropriate learning paradigms for students who speak two or more languages. Current research indicates that we are better able to describe the population of learners who speak two or more languages than we are to design pedagogies and programs to teach them.

Briefly, English Language Learners (ELLs) are considered to be students who speak little or no English and/or whose knowledge of English is limited to the extent that they cannot participate meaningfully in a classroom where English is the sole language of instruction (Crawford, 2004). This student population has grown dramatically during the past 20 years. In 1990, 2 million K–12 public school students, or one in 20, was an ELL. By 2005, there were more than 5 million such students, or 1 in 9. This growth is especially notable when considered in light of the fact that the overall K–12 population grew by less than 4% during the same time period (NCELA, 2006). Demographers estimate that in 20 years the number of ELLs may be as high as 1 in 4 (NCELA, 2006; Capp et al., 2005). Importantly, 60% of ELLs were born in the United States. They are U.S. citizens entitled to all the rights and privileges therein. Conversely, 80% of their parents are immigrants who were born outside of the country (Capp et al., 2005). This is just one of a number of contradictions that describes this student population.

Consider, for example, the oft celebrated linguistic heterogeneity of the ELL population. Although ELLs speak over 400 languages; it is critical to recognize that 80% speak Spanish and that the majority of Spanish speakers are from Mexico (Kindler, 2002). After Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Khmer, Laotian, Hindi, and Tagalog together comprise only about 8% of the ELL population. Thus, while the ELL population is diverse, it is overwhelmingly represented by Spanish-speaking students.

A further contradiction relates to the socio-economic status of ELLs. It is widely reported that the majority of ELLs are poor and/or economically disadvantaged (Larsen, 2004). While this is generally true for Spanish speaking ELLs, as well as for Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong, it does not describe the economic situation of Filipino, Indian, and Taiwanese ELLs, who often come from families with college degrees and middle class mores (Larsen, 2004). It is inappropriate to dismiss the socioeconomic diversity within the ELL population, and researchers and practitioners would be wise to consider the impact of this variable when drawing conclusions about effective practices. The Taiwanese, for example, who are represented less in the overall ELL population and who may be privileged with educational and economic backgrounds more aligned to the norms and expectations of middle-class U.S. schooling, are not an appropriate point of comparison for Spanish speaking ELLs who arrive to school with different economic and educational circumstances.

Currently, many research studies and syntheses lump ELLs into a single category without a detailed description of who these learners are, what language and cultural groups they belong to, how proficient they are in English or whether or not they are part of a majority/minority language group or a language group less numerous. It is quite likely that different populations of ELLs may have different instructional needs, yet ELLs are frequently treated in the research as if they are a homogeneous group. Add to this very serious shortcoming, the fact that the vast majority of identified ELLs are in school programs where English is the sole medium of instruction, thereby making it difficult for
researchers to identify and to document instructional programs and practices that may be efficacious for some groups of ELLs, but not for others (Zehler et al., 2003). Given that the population of ELLs is heterogeneous, but not numerically equivalent with regard to national origin, language, and socioeconomic status, it is critical that researchers carefully define their populations when doing research on ELLs. It is also important that the research include a great variety of school programs and instructional interventions for the burgeoning population of K–12 learners that are tailored to specific language and cultural groups.

We begin this chapter, therefore, with a caution to the reader that when learners speak two or more languages it is incumbent upon the research community to define precisely the population of learners who are being labeled ELL and to delineate the contexts in which these students are speaking and learning two or more languages. Further, given the uneven distribution of the ELL population, it is important that consumers of research understand that studies conducted on one ethnolinguistic group may not be generalizable to another, and that the current “one size fits all” English medium programs for ELLs is likely limiting our ability to design research that develops and implements more efficacious and innovative programs for these students. With this realistic, albeit discouraging, introduction, the remainder of this chapter will summarize briefly what we know from the extant research about K–12 ELLs and will outline some issues we still need to address to better serve this population.

We have divided our discussion into two parts. The first highlights the need to create more robust paradigms for understanding bilingual development, including more appropriate labels. The second discusses what we know about effective practices for students who speak and are learning two or more languages.

Beyond ELL: Toward a More Robust Understanding of Bilingualism

As stated above, there is a great need in the field for researchers to define the populations of ELLs that they are studying. Lumping ELLs into a single research sub-group does little to improve our understanding of these learners. In addition to better defining the population of ELLs in the United States, we must broaden our understanding of bilingual growth. Research and program development for ELLs in this country has focused for too long on the acquisition of English as the major and/or only educational outcome for ELLs, and has situated understandings of acquiring two languages within frameworks of sequential bilingualism. We need to expand our understandings and change our labels to reflect the desirability of bilingualism and biliteracy as academic outcomes within K–12 U.S. schooling.

For this reason, the term “English Language Learner” is problematic. It focuses solely on English acquisition without acknowledging the value of a learner’s additional languages and/or the value of becoming bilingual. At all levels of the educational spectrum, from the federal government to university researchers to policy makers and practitioners, emerging bilingual (García, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2006) children are routinely labeled ELL if learning English is their single most (or only) defining characteristic. It communicates an assimilationist outlook and the desire to mask the vast linguistic, cultural, and national diversity discussed above. Its ubiquitous use is evidenced by its prevalence even in schools where bilingual or dual language approaches are implemented. In sum, the term “ELL” enables researchers and program developers to dismiss and/or ignore the role that students’ native languages play both in learning English and in becoming bilingual.

It is worth noting that the last five meta-analyses examining what the research is telling us about how best to teach learners who speak two or more languages to read have all reached the same conclusion that teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English, not to mention that learning to read in two languages promotes biliteracy (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Greene, 1997; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005a, 2005b; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). The research is conclusive that children who speak two languages can become literate in two languages and that biliteracy instruction results in higher achievement in English. Changing our definition from English Language Learner to emerging bilingual learner begins the process of moving researchers and practitioners toward an understanding that reflects this research finding. Two languages are not competing for space in a student’s brain, but are mutually supportive and reinforcing. Bilingual practices, in fact, improve English acquisition. Changing the label from ELL to emerging bilingual learner might also enable us to broaden the goals of schooling from only English acquisition to that of bilingualism and biliteracy as desired outcomes of K–12 schooling.

Related to the limiting and problematic nature of the term ELL is the fact that our understandings of bilingual development in the past few decades have been focused on only one type of bilingual development known as sequential bilingual development. Frameworks of sequential bilingualism promote the notion that languages develop in isolation and that all students must have an identifiable first language which will be used only until students can be immersed in English medium instruction. This framework demands that languages be strictly separated and that literacy instruction be limited to one language at a time (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Lessow-Hurley, 2000). Given that the vast majority of students speaking two or more languages was born in the United States (Capp et al., 2005) and has been learning two languages since birth, the sequential bilingual paradigm is less applicable to understanding their bilingual development than is the simultaneous bilingual framework. Briefly defined, simultaneous bilingual children are those who, from the ages of 0–5, have been exposed to and are acquiring two languages (Baker, 2001). In contrast to the
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above, sequential bilinguals are persons who began the process of second language acquisition after the age of 6 with a well established first language base (Baker, 2001).

The distinction between sequential and simultaneous bilingualism is not minor as simultaneous bilinguals have attributes and behaviors that are commonly misunderstood by teachers, policy makers, and researchers who have heretofore relied solely upon sequential bilingual theories. Among the important characteristics of simultaneous bilinguals that lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation by researchers and practitioners are: (a) Simultaneous bilingual learners may know some concepts in one language and some in another language, therefore monolingual assessments may capture only some of what a learner knows and can do. When assessment only measures a portion of what a learner knows, it is easy to conclude that the learner has limited knowledge linguistically and/or conceptually; (b) Simultaneous bilingual learners have differing and often idiosyncratic patterns of language development particularly with regard to grammar and vocabulary that is different from monolinguals in each of their languages, and that may be interpreted as signs that two languages are confusing the learner. Rather, the simultaneous acquisition and development of two languages can be expected to have a unique and quite normal trajectory that differs in predictable ways from monolingual language and literacy growth; and (c) Simultaneous bilinguals often code-switch (deliberative use of two languages to communicate) leading to the conclusion that the learner does not know either language well. Misunderstanding the characteristics of simultaneous bilingual development have lead some to conclude that many ‘English Language Learners’ are deficient in both of their two languages; therefore it is important to focus solely on English since the learner does not have a well developed first language. While recent research has challenged the idea that simultaneous bilinguals are limited in both of their languages (McSwan, Rolstad, & Glass, 2002; Escamilla, 2006; Zentella, 2005), changing an ingrained paradigm is difficult.

The following examples more fully illustrate misinterpretations of simultaneous bilingual learner behavior. Simultaneous bilingual children may know some words or concepts in one language, and an alternative set of concepts in a different language because they come from homes where a language other than English is dominant, but attend a pre-school where English is the medium of instruction. These children learn concepts related to their families, food, games etc. in one language while they learn concepts related to school in English. To understand what these learners know across both of their languages requires a type of bilingual assessment that is virtually non-existent in the field today, but is very much needed if we are to gain a more complete picture of bilingual development.

With regard to grammar and vocabulary, simultaneous bilinguals may borrow verbs in one language and conjugate them regularly in their second language (e.g., estoy eskip-eando/I am skipping). The verb eskipear (to skip) was borrowed from the verb to skip in English and then conjugated in Spanish. While some might consider this borrowing to be a sign of language confusion, we argue a different perspective. Young, monolingual children frequently over generalize grammar rules. It is common to hear 4-year-olds say, “We goed to the store.” In the case of monolinguals, there is little concern about this grammar error as it is thought to be an over generalization and evidence that the child is internalizing the rule governed nature of language. The same can be said for the simultaneous bilingual. The learner has borrowed a word from English, and generalized its use in a grammatically correct way in Spanish. Rather than being a sign of cross-language confusion, we propose that this is a sign of normal simultaneous bilingual development. Currently, we lack a robust theory of simultaneous bilingual development that includes a comprehensive description of these phenomena.

With regard to code-switching, it should be noted that there is a large and growing body of research that concludes that contrary to being a linguistic deficit, it is in fact highly rule governed behavior, and symptomatic of a learner who has a very sophisticated understanding of how to communicate using two languages (Escamilla & Hopewell, 2007; Kenner, 2004; Zentella, 1997). As members of bilingual communities, many have learned to draw on all of their linguistic resources when communicating with other bilinguals. As a field, our research on students who speak two or more languages has been limited by the use of the term ELL and by the prevailing sequential bilingual paradigms. More robust understandings of bilingualism must be added to our knowledge base particularly for K–12 students who speak two or more languages and have resided in the United States since birth.

Is Good Teaching Really Just Good Teaching?

Issues in Quality Instruction for Emerging Bilingual Learners

The final section of this chapter deals with issues of quality of instruction for emerging bilingual Learners. While much has been written and/or debated about the language of instruction for speakers of two or more languages, much less has been written about the quality of language instruction for these students. We submit that both are important. As stated above, the results of five major meta-analyses and research syntheses have concluded that teaching emerging bilingual students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English (August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee et al., 2006; Greene, 1997; Rolstad et al., 2005a, 2005b; Slavin & Cheung, 2005). However, it is important to note that this conclusion is based largely on work with Spanish/English emerging bilingual students whose first and second languages share an alphabetic principle and whose languages are both major world languages spoken by millions of people. This finding may or may not apply to less common languages and/or to languages that do not
have a written orthographic system. Further, it is apparent that the effects of learning to read in two languages are cumulative; that is, greater benefits are derived if the bilingual reading instruction is carried out over a longer period of time (e.g., 5 years is more beneficial than 1; Goldenberg, 2008). This suggests that if bilingual reading instruction is to benefit reading achievement in English, more is better. Finally, cross-language transfer needs to be taught explicitly. Not all students infer and can apply orthographic, phonemic, syntactic, and semantic similarities across languages without direct instruction. Moreover, the greatest benefit of learning to read and write in two languages is the obvious benefit of biliteracy.

While research strongly supports the use of students’ native languages (especially Spanish) as a part of a comprehensive instructional program for students learning two or more languages, the fact is that there are situations where it is not possible to implement this type of program and/or where state or local educational policies prohibit or limit the use of languages other than English in instruction. Unfortunately, many believe that if non-English languages cannot be used for content and language arts instruction, they should not be used at all, and in some contexts students’ native languages are banned from use in classrooms, on playgrounds and in the overall school environment.

It is noteworthy that there is no research evidence to support that banning non-English languages accelerates English language acquisition, in fact, such practices may serve to decrease motivation thereby having a negative impact. What the research indicates is that using students’ native languages can enhance learning even if they are not used as a medium of instruction. For example, students’ native languages can be used in clarifying information and concepts, in classroom management, in communicating with parents, in encouraging students to make cross-language connections, and in promoting the value of bilingualism (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008). The research is clear that bilingualism is a cultural, intellectual, cognitive, vocational, and economic advantage. Further, it is also clear that banning or forbidding learners to use their native languages in schools is counter-productive and does not accelerate English acquisition.

Due to the generic nature of the research on emerging bilingual learners (e.g. lumping all language groups into a single sub-category), it has been postulated too often that teachers really do not need to modify instruction in any significant way for learners who speak two or more languages, and that good teaching is good teaching. In fairness, the research indicates that this platitude is somewhat accurate, and some of what we know about good instruction and curriculum in general holds true for emerging bilingual learners (August & Shanahan, 2006; Goldenberg, 2008). Research indicates, for example, that all students benefit from: predictable and consistent classroom routines; well-designed, clearly structured and appropriately paced instruction; active engagement and participation; opportunities to practice, apply, and transfer new learning; feedback on correct and incorrect responses; frequent and periodic assessment of progress; and feeling that they belong to a classroom and school community. In this regard good teaching is good teaching.

However, it is equally clear in the research that when instructing emergent bilingual learners in English, teachers must modify instruction to take into account students’ developing English skills especially in teaching literacy. Emerging bilingual learners benefit from direct and explicit instruction in the components of literacy (Genesee et al., 2006), further studies of vocabulary instruction also show these students are more likely to learn words when they are directly taught and when the words are embedded in meaningful contexts with ample opportunities for repetition. However, there are no studies documenting the benefits of direct teaching of phonemic awareness and subsequent comprehension of text for emerging bilingual learners; and there is a dearth of research on reading comprehension strategies for emerging bilingual learners. In fact, strategies that have been found to be effective for monolingual English learners have not had the same results for learners who speak two or more languages (August & Shanahan, 2006).

Finally, there is emerging evidence that there is no need to delay the teaching of literacy in English to learners speaking two or more languages until some level of oral language proficiency is achieved in English, that literacy and language arts teaching should focus on productive as well as receptive skills and that teaching writing is likely as important as teaching reading (Slavin & Cheung, 2005). Finally, for speakers of two or more languages, the role of oral language development is critical to English language acquisition. Contrary to previous assumptions, the English language arts and literacy program should not be thought to be the same for second language learners as for monolingual English learners only delivered in a delayed structure. The language arts program needs significant modification. These results indicate that good teaching is not good teaching in many aspects of language arts and literacy teaching and K–12 instructional programs.

Aside from language arts and literacy, the research seems to indicate that emerging bilingual learners must have time to learn English as a language, and that there is a need for separate ELD time (Saunders, Foorman, & Carlson, 2006). Content based approaches to teaching English as a second Language, such as Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) or sheltered English instruction, assist students in acquiring content in English, but these content based approaches alone are insufficient.

The research seems to be clear that learners who speak two or more languages need comprehensive long-term programs to become fully proficient in English, and ideally to become bilingual and biliterate. Such programs need to teach both academic and social language, they need to be delivered using a variety of instructional techniques and approaches, and they need to be built upon the assumption that learning a second language, like learning a first takes a lifetime. Sadly, for the 5 million students who are speakers...
of two or more languages, the more we know about how to best teach them, the less it seems we want to do.

Conclusion

We conclude this chapter with a brief summary of what we know and what we still need to learn. We know how diverse our population is and yet we still need to better define it in research studies. We need a more robust understanding of and value for bilingual development. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, we need a will to implement quality, comprehensive, and long-term programs for learners who speak two or more languages that consider their unique strengths and needs.

References


