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Krickhan, Marlene

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PARADIGM SHIFTS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR BILINGUAL PROGRAMING

Marlene Krickhan
University of Calgary

Aspen Grove School (pseudonym), a Spanish bilingual elementary school in a large urban centre of Alberta, Canada, encounters a shift of paradigm in language learning. By adhering to a historically traditional paradigm of bilingual education, the learning community identified a gap between its understanding of holistic, cross-curricular inquiries, and the constraints of dividing subjects and teachers into segregated instructional language blocks. Through an analysis of cognitive and sociolinguistic theories presented in the literature, an argument is posed for a shift in paradigms, to a holistic, flexible approach to inquiry through language learning. Issues of programming are discussed as a result of this paradigm shift, and seven implications are provided for future implementation and action research in the field.

El colegio Aspen Grove (pseudónimo), una escuela pública bilingüe en un centro urbano de Alberta, Canadá, encuentra un cambio de paradigma en el aprendizaje del idioma. A través de seguir un paradigma del bilingüismo que es históricamente tradicional, la comunidad de aprendizaje ha identificado una brecha entre su conocimiento de implementar proyectos más holísticos e intra-curriculares, con las limitaciones de dividir las materias y los profesores por idiomas segregados. A partir de un análisis de las teorías cognitivas y constructivistas que se encuentran en la literatura, se plantea un argumento por un cambio de paradigma, a un acercamiento más holístico y flexible a través del aprendizaje del idioma. Considerando este cambio, se discuten problemas relacionados con los programas de estudios y se proponen siete implicaciones para su implementación e investigación.

INTRODUCTION

Aspen Grove School, International Spanish Academy, is a K-4 bilingual school within a large school board of western Canada. Its designation as an International Spanish Academy is based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the government of Spain and the province of Alberta (Alberta Education, 2006). Aspen Grove School has encountered several pedagogical and programming complexities, which are compounded by an evolving paradigm in education generally, and in language learning specifically. The following paper seeks to address the theoretical underpinnings with which the alternative language programs in Alberta were originally formed in 1982 (Alberta Education, 1997), and propose new directions for enacting a more holistic orientation to language learning within bilingual schools.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The framework for developing bilingual educational programs has been traditionally rooted in the argument that languages be kept separate (Jacobson & Faltis, 1990). Establishing a learning

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environment of strict compartmentalization of languages, in which specific subjects and physical locations are allocated, has historically been considered best practice (Garcia, 1996). Numerous early guidelines for alternative language planning echo this assumption,(Alberta Education, 2003; 2007; 2009). The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the government of Spain and the province of Alberta outlines a mandatory 50% Spanish language instruction component in K-6, covering the areas of “Spanish language arts, mathematics, fine arts, and/or other specific subjects to be determined” (Alberta Education, 2006, p.4) The ensuing policies from these guiding documents have resulted in a large majority of elementary bilingual campuses designating a half day block of Spanish instruction to the aforementioned subject areas, with the remaining block of English instruction designated to subject areas such as Social Studies and Science.

SEPARATE BILINGUALISM

Throughout the ten years since its inception, Aspen Grove School, as in other Spanish bilingual contexts in the province, has adhered to this structure for bilingual programming. With the separation of languages by subject and teacher, an unsettling phenomenon began to be observed within Aspen Grove School classrooms, which contradicts the fundamental beliefs of instructional leaders regarding constructivist approaches to knowledge creation. Teachers and students would explore intellectually stimulating issues and inquiry questions within the English component of the day, enriching the critical thinking skills and creative contributions from students. However, in the Spanish component of the day, a notable difference was observed, in which teacher-directed and narrowly scripted tasks for second language comprehension and vocabulary growth were being perpetuated. Content learning in one language was rarely connected to the other, reflective of a deficit view of L1 threatening L2 acquisition.

The literature describes the view of languages as occupying separate instructional, social and cognitive spaces as the *two solitudes assumption* (Cummins, 2005), or *parallel monolingualism* (Heller, 1999). It alludes to a paradigm of language-as-problem, instead of language-as-resource. At Aspen Grove School, this paradigm has impinged upon developing holistic pedagogical practices. It perpetuates a chronic fragmentation in which learning is isolated and disconnected into myriad units and themes of instruction (Friesen & Jardine, 2009). While the current educational milieu heralds strong intentionality for innovation in education (Alberta Education, 2010), the alternative language programs have felt restricted by traditional learning environments and teacher-directed instruction, reflective also of a belief that learners do not possess the skills to engage at a deep intellectual level through the language.

FLEXIBLE BILINGUALISM

Through emerging research in the field of language learning, and with the support of various educational partners, such as the Galileo Educational Network Association, an ideological shift in vision is emerging within the Aspen Grove School professional community. It seeks to redefine the approach in which students acquire knowledge through both languages, and to expand cross-curricular inquiry into real-world problems that is flexible and experiential in nature. Within a more generous interpretation of the program of studies (Jardine, Friesen & Clifford, 2006), bilingualism is viewed not

as the goal in itself, but as a vehicle to authentic task design and problem-based orientations with varying cultural and linguistic nuances.

The notion of *content-based*, or *task-based* learning through L2 receives conflicting coverage in the literature. The assumption that students are not capable of engaging in academically rigorous learning until they have the second language skills to do so is situated within a monolingual paradigm. Emerging viewpoints contest this theory, and its ensuing programming and staffing implications. In a recent report by Duibhir and Cummins (2012), research results indicate that task-based instruction promotes communication, and communication promotes motivation. From a socio-cultural perspective, collaborative talk mediates cognition and learning. However, in order to engage in collaborative communication and deep inquiry, drawing upon prior knowledge - which may be encoded within the L1 - must be permitted. Garcia and Sylvan (2011) state that flexibility must be exercised in constructing new knowledge by drawing upon existing knowledge, and to engage in this process across and between languages. By experiencing and learning new concepts, students extend their knowledge base: Content is no longer driven by the aim of teaching a linguistic structure nor is the language simplified and sacrificed to content.

While this view resonates with the instructional leaders of Aspen Grove School, breaking out of the existing parameters for pedagogy and programming is daunting. Cummins (2007) aptly observes that traditional “monolingual instructional approaches appear at variance with activation of prior knowledge in L1 because they see L1 as an impediment to the learning of L2. And where they do acknowledge prior knowledge, they are likely to insist that its expression only be in L2” (p.232). The pedagogical basis of monolingual instructional approaches appears dedicated to minimizing and inhibiting the possibility of two-way transfer across languages. Lemke (2002) contests that current pedagogical methods in fact make multilingual development more difficult than it need be, simply because of “dominant political and ideological pressures to keep languages pure and separate” (as cited by Creese & Blackledge, 2010, p.106).

PARADIGM SHIFT

Aspen Grove School has begun to adopt a more holistic stance in literacy development, in which the totality of what bilingual learners know and can do is distributed across languages, and in which children are thus increasingly capable of bi-directional transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills (Soltero-Gonzalez, Escamilla & Hopewell, n.d.). When the development of new languages is considered alongside the development of existing languages, an interrelationship between teacher and learners emerge, in making the implicit linguistic connections explicit (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). Several advantages have emerged in Aspen Grove School classrooms, through a holistic approach to language and literacy development. These advantages, which confirm our underlying values about the constructivist approach to learning, merit observation and continued action research.

First, by endorsing simultaneous literacies and languages, the pedagogic task is deepened and greater access to the curriculum is achieved. Hornberger (2005) attests that bilingual learning is maximized when students are “allowed to draw from across their existing languages, rather than being constrained

and inhibited from doing so by monolingual instructional assumptions and practices” (as cited in Creese & Blackledge, 2010, p.106). Second, when teachers are permitted to explicitly draw children’s attention to similarities and differences between languages, a heightened metalinguistic awareness is nurtured, which reinforces cross-linguistic transfer through coordinated strategies in the classroom (Duibhir & Cummins, 2012). Third, cross-linguistic projects hold the potential to “showcase children’s developing identities as bilinguals [develop] pride in their accomplishments in both languages” (Duibhir & Cummins, 2012, p.35). From a socio-cultural perspective, new identity positions associated with language processes can emerge (Creese & Blackledge, 2010). In this way, bilingualism is engaged as a style resource for shared identity performances between teachers and students (Conteh, 2007).

IMPLICATIONS

Through experimentation with a more flexible approach to bilingual programming, Aspen Grove School has been thrust into the middle of a relevant debate of paradigms, in which “some of the principles that bilingual education has long held dear must be let go of” (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011, p.390). Escamilla and Hopewell (2009) state that the field of bilingual education “is in dire need of new theories and innovative instructional approaches about how to best teach emerging bilinguals” (p.67). The recent theories presented in the literature above confirm that a reconceptualization of language programming and staffing must be contemplated amongst key. Cummins (2007) states that “the two solitudes assumption within bilingual programs is fundamentally at variance with current understanding of bilingual and multilingual mental functioning” (p.234). This statement, in light of the emerging literature, holds significant implications for eight key areas of bilingual programming and staffing at the elementary and middle second levels:

1. Challenge the current allotment of subjects by language. Generous inquiry must allow for the inclusion of both languages, across and through the curriculum in such a way that L2 is both supported and strengthened by L1. Re-structure the current allotment of core subjects in English (Social Studies, Science) and secondary subjects in Spanish (art, physical education).
2. Customize the L2 instructional blocks so that while long lapses of exposure and interaction in L2 occur, schedules are not institutionalized in a way which disregard the daily classroom patterns, nor children’s emerging needs and interests in learning (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011).
3. Negotiate a shared professional understanding for the role of translanguaging within inquiry-based classrooms. Differentiate between translanguaging as *sense-making* and translanguaging as a *default mechanism* (University of Cambridge, 2008; Garcia & Sylvan, 2011).
4. As a learning community, commit to an extensive amount of comprehensible L2 input (Cummins, 2007). Resource classrooms with bilingual generalist teachers, rather than language specialists, providing additional input during transitional activities in the classroom and within the school environment (Duibhir & Cummins, 2012), serves as a bridge to connecting pedagogy and content learning.

5. Adopt a balanced bilingual literacy approach with an intentional focus on oral language expression, the development of formulaic expressions, and the delay of grammar teaching in the earlier years of bilingual education (Duibhir & Cummins, 2012). Promote rich reading and writing experiences in L1, which are cross-linguistically transferrable to L2 thereafter.
6. Designate blocks of time for the guided and explicit development of metalinguistic strategies (Duibhir & Cummins, 2012). Consider the strategic use of dual language reading and student-authoring of dual language books within the balanced bilingual literacy program (Sneddon, 2008).
7. Re-conceptualize assessment practices which rely on monolingual rubrics developed in L1 and then adapted to L2 (Escamilla & Hopewell, 2009). These measures assess one language at a time, and inherently overlook the complex psycholinguistic system of the multilingual learner (Cummins, n.d.)

Dialogue must occur between local and international stakeholders; local school boards; human resources departments; and school-based administrators in re-conceptualizing bilingual programs that are reflective of a newly emerging field of research. Creese and Blackledge (2010) state that “although we can acknowledge that across all linguistically diverse contexts moving between languages is natural, how to harness and build on this will depend on the socio-political and historical environment in which such practice is embedded and the local ecologies of schools and classrooms” (p.107). Considering the compelling search which the Aspen Grove School learning community has embarked upon, and considering the body of research which supports a paradigm shift in language learning, an optimistic correlation between theory and practice is evident.

CONCLUSION

Through analysing the evolution of theory and practice at Aspen Grove School, International Spanish Academy, a paradigm shift in language learning is identified. This paradigm shift resides at the cusp of existing theory which views bilingual education as the development of two separate monolingual systems, and an emerging theory which views language learning as a dynamic and interchangeable process. Implications for pedagogy and programming within the bilingual context are significant, and require mutual investment from various stakeholders within the educational community.

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