

Bilingual Education with focus on the immersion program at Bayswater South Primary School, Melbourne



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14th October 2012

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1.0 Introduction

This is an investigation of bilingual education with focus on the German bilingual program at Bayswater South Primary School, Melbourne. The report outlines two models of bilingual education and two second language theories informing the practice: Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis. The report also highlights the cognitive and social benefits of becoming bilingual.

2.0 Bilingual Education

2.1 Bilingual Education: defined

Bilingual education is when two languages are used as the media of instruction for curriculum content (Genesee 2004, cited in Banfi & Rettaroli 2008, p. 141).

2.2 Bilingual Education: models

There are various forms and ways of categorizing bilingual education many of which are beyond the scope of this report; I will therefore focus on two forms: total immersion and content-based partial immersion.

Immersion programs:

As Edwards (2009, p. 46) highlights, although the following two immersion programs were originally introduced 'to serve the needs of majority speakers', they are also used today to maintain indigenous and lesser-used languages.

2.2.1 Total immersion

Total immersion is the original model of bilingual education developed in Canada in the 1960s in order to improve the French linguistic skills of English speaking students. In this model, almost 100% of the school day is spent in

the target language (TL). The language of immersion is usually a second language (L2) but can also be a minority language and therefore also serves the purpose of language maintenance. The following are some of the main features of the program:

- Students are typically all English speakers
- Children learn to read in this language first
- All subjects in the lower grades are taught in the TL with English introduced in the upper grades
- Its aim can be language maintenance or an additive program in which bilingualism and biliteracy are sought (Edwards 2009, p. 46).

2.2.2 Content-based partial immersion

This program is called content-based because content subjects are taught in both languages. It differs from total immersion as not all of the instructional time is in the second language, hence its name: partial immersion. In the Australian context, up to half the subjects are taught in the L2. The following are some of the main features of the program:

- Students are typically all English speakers
- Literacy is taught in both languages
- The percentage, in which the TL is introduced, remains constant throughout
- The aims can be language maintenance or an additive program in which bilingualism and biliteracy are sought (Edwards 2009, p. 46)

3.0 Second Language Acquisition theories

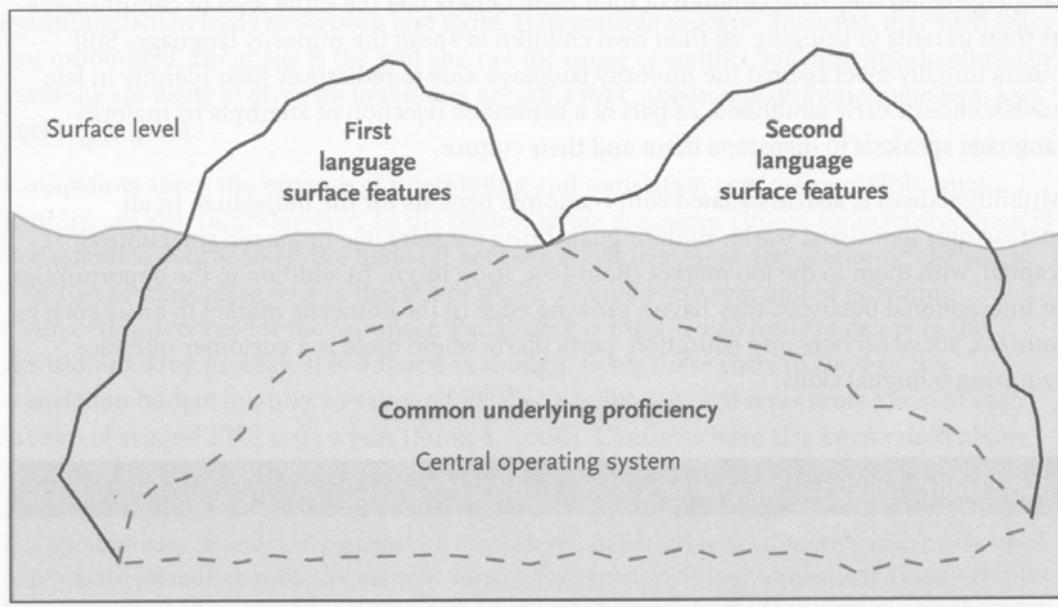
3.1 Krashen's Input Hypothesis

According to Krashen (Fernandez 1992, p. 7) grammar does not precede communicative competence in a second language; rather structure is acquired through extensive exposure to 'real' communication in a second language.

Hence language is acquired through use. Central to Krashen's theory is the "Input hypothesis", in which he proposes that we acquire language through interaction with "comprehensible input": that we acquire language only when we *understand* language' which is just beyond our current understanding (Fernandez 1992, p. 7). Krashen (Fernandez 1992, p. 8) argues 'the existence of a "monitor" in which structures [...] are stored and used to edit or correct actual speech production'. Thus, simultaneously to our engagement with the L2, we are subconsciously working out the grammatical rules for the code which inevitably drives our learning forward. This can only be achieved through extensive involvement with the L2. Support for Krashen's theory can be found in the success of bilingual immersion programs in which students have maximum exposure to the TL and use it by 'doing' in the 'here and now' (Fernandez 1992, p. 10 & Lo Bianco 2010) .

3.2 Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis

A further theory informing bilingual education is Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis which proposes that given adequate exposure to a language that transfer will take place from that code to another one (Edwards 2009, p. 62). Central to his theory is the Common Underlying Proficiency Theory (CUP) which predicts that 'although surface features, such as grammar and vocabulary, vary [...] from one language to another, they are integrated in a single thought process' (Edwards 2009, p. 59). Thus, information processing, literacy and other cognitive skills can be transferred from one language to another and do not need to be learned afresh for each new language (Edwards 2009, p. 62).



(Edwards 2009, p. 19)

Figure 1: Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency

4.0 Benefits of becoming bilingual

There are distinct advantages in learning a second language. As Edwards (2009, p. 19) highlights, bilingual children 'have higher levels of metalinguistic awareness' so they are able 'to focus on the form' of language. Given that these skills are then transferable to the other codes, including the L1, students who learn a second language generally see improvements in their first code. This has certainly been my experience; in learning the subsystems of German including its syntax and phonology, I now have a heightened awareness of the structure and sounds of English and have seen a marked improvement in my English skills. There are also cognitive benefits; 'psychologists point to [...] [a] greater mental flexibility [...] [in] bilinguals and heightened problem solving skills (Edwards 2009, pp. 19-20). Apart from cognitive benefits, as Clyne (1992) points out there is a definite social advantage; becoming bilingual breaks down stereotypes and monocentrism in society. This is particularly important in the Australian context in which we continue to grapple with pluralism, in spite of a long history of multiculturalism.

5.0 A bilingual program versus a second language program

In Melbourne, as well as in the wider Australian context, the usual way of learning a second language is through a language program in which the code is treated as a subject in isolation to the content curriculum. In general, 'a [...] [language] program offers classes for 150 minutes per week' (DEED 2012). Alternately, there are sixteen bilingual programs in operation in Melbourne. These are all content-based partial immersion in which up to 7.5 hours per week are spent in the second language. This model serves the Melbourne community well by maintaining a minority code such as Vietnamese as well as fostering bilingualism and biliteracy. In comparison to a second language program in which learners have minimum exposure to the TL and it is treated in isolation, a bilingual program not only offers greater exposure to it, but also the opportunity to engage fully with the language as the medium of instruction for content. This has clear benefits for the learner, as Lo Bianco (2010) points out, not only are bilingual programs more affective for language acquisition but the cognitive benefits are also more accessible through the higher skill level gained through the bilingual experience.

6.0 The bilingual program at Bayswater South Primary School

6.1 The School and its students

Bayswater South Primary School (BSPS) is a Foundation – Year 6 primary School in Melbourne's outer Eastern suburbs. It has been running a successful German-English bilingual program since 1981. With approximately 90% of students coming from a typical Australian multicultural setting, the school's program predominantly fulfils the additive aim of fostering bilingualism. It also plays a language maintenance role as 10% of students have either immediate or distant German heritage.

6.2 The bilingual program

BSPS runs a content-based partial immersion program in which 30% of instruction time is in the TL, German, with the remaining 70% in English. It is a content-based program in which content is taught in the two languages. The principle tenet informing the program is that 'children learn about the world by learning a second language' (Fernandez 1992). The program has an emphasis on subjects which facilitate language acquisition through their exploratory, non-verbal nature such as Science, Social Science and Art. In addition, it has an integrated curriculum in which Design, Creation and Technology (DCT) is integrated into in the core academic subjects so students are able to continually apply knowledge.

6.3 Subjects taught in the two languages

Both languages: Maths is taught in both the L1 and L2. While the theoretical more verbal component is taught in English, the applied, non-verbal is instructed in English.

German only: Science is taught in the L2 and heavily integrated with DCT. Art and German literacy (including grammar which is *always* taught in context and intercultural knowledge and awareness) are also taught in German.

English only: English literacy, ICT, music and health and physical education are taught in English

6.4 Language acquisition through 'context' and non-verbal cues

Fortunately, during my visit to BSPS, I had the opportunity of observing a Year 5 Science lesson. What was striking about this learning environment was its highly contextualized and visual nature. Objects of study hang from the walls and ceiling and *realia* is used when introducing new concepts. As Fernandez (1992, pp. 19-20) highlights 'visual aids such as pictures and [...] [objects] are integral in the immersion classroom as they provide 'familiar and recognizable information in a non verbal' way to the learner; children use 'their existing knowledge to interact with the situation'. Similarly, gestures, facial expressions

and voice are used by the teacher to facilitate comprehension (Fernandez 1992, p. 20).



Figure 2: Year 5 classroom at BSPS

6.5 Language acquisition through ‘use’ and ‘inquiry’

As mentioned, BSPS’s curriculum focuses on those subjects which facilitate second language acquisition. Science is an experiential subject in which students are active in the here and now and there is a real communicative need. During my visit to BSPS, I observed a Year 1 Science experiment in the TL in which students used a solution of salt and vinegar to clean copper coins. This was indeed active learning; the inquiry based experiment had stimulated discussion of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ so students were involved in much discussion in the TL. In line with Krashen’s input hypothesis theory, children were acquiring language through their engagement in the ‘here and now’. In addition, the *realia* of the salt, vinegar and coins had provided familiar comprehensible input so the new concepts in the experiment, with appropriate scaffolding, were understandable for students.



Figure 3: A Year 1 Science experiment at BSPS

6.6 Student results

The success of BSPS's bilingual program can be found in the academic performance of its students. All students in Years 5 and 6 participate in the annual University of New South Wales Science Competition in which BSPS students consistently outperform similar schools and this is in spite of the fact that the test is in English but the students are instructed in German. In line with Cummins' interdependence hypothesis students are successfully transferring concepts learnt in their second language to their first. Academic success is also evident in the Maths domain. According to the Year 5 teacher (interview conducted on 7 August 2012) some students are already working on VELS levels: 5.1, 5.3 and 6, levels which are normally only reached in Years 7 and 8, and this is a regular occurrence.

7.0 Conclusion

There are clear advantages of bilingual education. While the individual can benefit from increased linguistic awareness and heightened cognitive functioning, society has much to gain from becoming more cohesive. Both are clearly evident in the bilingual program at Bayswater South Primary School in which students not only enjoy academic success but are also highly accepting of their peers and the linguistic diversity this brings. Our next challenge is to see an expansion of bilingual education in the Australian context whereby content and language integrated learning also occurs in the mainstream.

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