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A New Guy's Understanding of Bilingual Education

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I want to share a fundamental understanding about bilingual education. Or rather, an understanding that is basic to educators familiar with the issues, but still too unknown to the general public. How do I know it is unknown? There are still large and loud political debates on the issue, even though program experience and academic research are amazingly one-sided on outcomes.

First, let me introduce myself a bit: I am a student in the California State University, Channel Islands (CSUCI) School of Education, working toward my teaching credential. I am a bit older than the usual student: I approach teaching after being a parent of public school students for thirteen years. Before I was a parent, I worked in public policy in Los Angeles. My wife and I are products of public schools ourselves: I went to public schools in Orange County; my wife went through the LA Unified School District.

To mask my age a bit with younger students at CSUCI, I joke that I have a 20th Century education, rather than jar them with a graduation date. But you know, I see that our society has a 20th Century understanding of English Language Learners (ELLs) as well.

If you and I had talked at some afternoon party last fall, you would have found I had only a vague idea of what the issues were. I was in favor of multicultural education, to the extent that I had some limited definition in mind. On ELL education, I was not unlike what I perceive to be the general public's (i.e. white, native-English speakers: a majority of active voters) mainstream understanding: moving non-English speakers into English as soon as possible helps them enter American society and avoid marginalization. It feels like common sense to bring students into the language of the country quickly. It turns out that this common sense is actually simplistic and uninformed.

With just a little exposure to academic research, and classroom work, my views have shifted significantly. Also, my fellow students, from various walks of life, have been a real source of insight for me.

Despite the realities in our public schools, however, facts and educational results are a bad place to start a conversation about bilingual education. The facts point to a need for bilingual education. But in public discourse, we are really talking about beliefs. To counter the uninformed "common sense" I mentioned, real-world studies are not enough; opponents will dismiss or simply ignore these findings. It is better to

replace the faulty, simplistic common sense understandings (beliefs) with better, informed, common sense understandings (beliefs).

We can get a long way with only two concepts. First is the idea that when a person learns, regardless of language, they learn. The other idea is the understanding that we are dealing with two different types of language skills in our schools. I am avoiding academic jargon, but if you would like to get into the academics, as well as get some of the history of the successes of bilingual programs, a good place to start is with a quick internet search for language education professor James Cummins.

A major argument against bilingual education is that somehow something learned in a different language cannot be used by that person in English. But input is irrelevant: when a student learns about fotosíntesis in Spanish, for example, she or he will be able to explain in either language how a tree takes in water, carbon dioxide, and light to produce sugars and oxygen, once the language skills catch up. The "English side" of the brain does not stay ignorant; after all, there is no "English side" of the brain. If you agree with this, you have to logically concede that it makes more sense to learn material in whatever language is understood.

But wait. If a student is allowed to stay in his or her own language, he or she will not learn English. This of course is false, because while a student is learning content material, English is also being taught. The biggest problems in schools have long been when students are forced out of a language they know before they can learn English, thereby losing time on all subjects and often struggling so badly as to never catch up to peers in English.

On transitioning into English, we have to realize that there are two general types of language skills: basic, conversational language skills and subject-matter, academic language skills. This is well-known to many educators, but the general concept has been experienced by anyone who has gone to school. Every student encounters this distinction, and the academic-specific language just takes longer for everyone to master. For example, middle schoolers normally have no problem expressing a preference on movies, but take quite a bit of work to be able to summarize the plots of two movies and then explain and justify an analysis comparing and contrasting story elements.

For someone learning English, learning both types of language skills, as well as catching up to native-speaking peers who are also working on learning these skills, simply takes time. How much time? Research has consistently shown that to pick up the language well enough to carry on conversations can take around two years, with some basic ability much sooner. A proficiency in academic language skills clearly takes longer to develop; experience finds that ELLs will normally take five to seven years to develop skills sufficient to catch up to standard grade-level capabilities.

Given that it will take ELLs years to catch up to the content work expectations of fluent students, it clearly makes no sense to waste those years by not teaching subjects in a language the students do understand, transitioning to English when sufficient proficiency has been achieved. That is, if we want all students to eventually participate in society as educated individuals, then common sense requires us to acknowledge that our public schools need to provide those who are new to English with years of language support, ideally bilingual education.

I am going to be a math teacher, so I researched issues of math for ELLs. Mathematics might seem to be the least problematic subject. After all, it is all just numbers, right? As it turns out, difficulties come up in

math in just about every imaginable ELL issue area: academic language terminology, confusion in common language use, and hard-to-translate terms. And of course, what would math be without word problems? As a result, math actually provides a good example of the problems ELLs face in school.

As we all know, and tend to forget, math is full of academic jargon. Even easy words like quotient, hypotenuse, quadratic, circumference, divisor, dividend, polynomial, and denominator are not going to be found in standard translation dictionaries, nor in everyday conversation. It takes time and specific education to get these words right. Worse, many "everyday" words are found in math but do not mean the same thing they do in regular usage. Words like table, even, negative, area, root, positive, product, division, and obtuse are deceptive for the English learner because they look like known words but are not used in math in the same ways.

The existence of many synonyms in English also makes math that much harder for a language learner. Consider that the simple act of adding can use words like add, plus, and, sum, total, more than, total of, increased by, greater than, and combined.

And yet another hurdle: there are numerous very specific terms that look like they could be translated word-for-word, but really cannot, like "Least Common Multiple," or "Greatest Common Factor." My favorite is "Alternate Interior Angles." To see the problem in English, I tried to "translate" using a thesaurus, mimicking the two-language dictionary experience. I thought I could end up with something like "alternating inside corners." Well, my Webster's thesaurus simply did not understand the word "angle" as a math term, and provided "point of view" or "aspect." It is very likely that most general purpose, two-language dictionaries would do the same. "Alternate" was not in my thesaurus either, but "alternative" came out as "power," "right," or "opportunity to choose." "Interior" was the easiest word, translating as "inner" or "inside." Unfortunately, putting these results together based on their own similarities, I come up with something like "the opportunity for an inside point of view," which has nothing to do with math. If I did not translate "alternate," I could come up with a word-to-word translation of something like "alternate inner aspects," which could sound mathematical, but basically has nothing to do with the original term.

These are very simple examples of English learning problems in math, and ignore the problems even native-speakers have with the subject. Combined with the relatively simple, informed, common sense understanding of how language learning actually works with school material, I hope it becomes clear to all of us that bilingual education is the best educational option, providing people with the best chance for succeeding in our society.

About the Author

David Lynn is a graduate student in the School of Education at CSU Channel Islands. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley with a double major in human geography and social science, and his MBA from Pepperdine University. A father of two school-aged children, he currently substitute teaches in the Las Virgenes Unified School District and Oxnard Union High School District.