

The bilingual basics¹

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Abstract

While the authors vary their explanation of the bilingual basics depending on their audience and the context, their underlying message stays constant: English development may be the key to success in American contexts now, future social and economic success entails thriving in a multilingual world where L1 maintenance is as important as ESL.

The more, the better.

The sooner, the better

The faster, the better

The harder, the better

The louder, the better.

Often, it seems that this is what the public understands about second language acquisition. If we want children to speak English, and we do, we have to give more, sooner, faster, harder, and louder. Because of this public (mis)understanding, each of us is often called upon to explain language acquisition, ESL, bilingual education, and the multiple approaches to immersion. The following are some of the ways we respond, depending on our audience and the context.

Defining Bilingual Education in various contexts

In what follows, we will share our definitions, not so you will memorize them; rather, we hope that our definitions will help you articulate your own understandings. We, like you, get to define ESL and bilingual education on airplane trips, trips to the grocery store, and social gatherings. We have also noticed that this is not true for *all* academics. For example, a dear colleague is a statistician; very few understand what she does, and very few ever ask her to explain it: not true in bilingual education.

Our basic understandings

ESL, which is known as English language development (ELD) in some areas, focuses on the development of conversational and academic language for students who are not yet speaking English. The goal of ESL programs is the acquisition of English. Some programs, such as ESL in the Content Area, use content as a vehicle for the development of English. The students are often early language learners in the various models of ESL.

Sheltered content instruction is sometimes referred to as specially-designed academic English instruction (SDAIE). The goal is to make grade-level content (math, social studies, science) understandable and meaningful for non-native speakers of English. Academic language is used to link prior knowledge and experiences with the generation of new concepts and cognition. Students in sheltered programs are often intermediate language learners.

When speaking with school administrators

First, when we are in an inservice session filled with principals, curriculum directors, and teachers who are interested and eager to understand, we say the following.

The goal of bilingual education is English: understanding, speaking, reading, and writing. A program consists of:

- good oral language development, often referred to as ESL (English-as-a-Second Language)

- good sheltered content instruction; access to the core curriculum in the students' dominant language, and
- good mainstream activities and integration with all students.

The way each school or district divides up the day or week to provide the various components depends on the needs of the students, the human resources within the district, and the political will to provide the best services possible to the students who need it the most.

Early language learners of any age need more oral language (English, in this case) development and more time learning content in their primary language. Oral language includes the development of conversational and academic language.

Intermediate language learners need a little less time with oral English, and a little more time with sheltered content instruction. Intermediate language learners still need good primary language instruction.

Later language learners need even less oral English development and more sheltered content instruction. Later language learners still need good primary language learning experiences. For example, we can classify Joan and Dawn as *later language learners* in Spanish, but they still need good primary language (English) experiences.

All language learners need conversational and academic language. All language learners need literacy.

When speaking in California

When we do an inservice in California, we make small changes to fit the context. For example, when we are talking about *early language learners* in California and their need for good oral English, we do not say ESL (English-as-a-Second-Language). We say ELD (English Language Development). From our perspective it does not matter if we say ESL or ELD or simply conversational and academic language development. That said, we are aware that unique language develops in various contexts. For example, in California, ELD now includes a heavy focus on literacy development, which we applaud. We are aware that other states use the word ESL, and also focus on literacy development. What matters is that teachers understand how important oral language acquisition is particularly for the *early language learners*. Even *intermediate language learners* need lots of good oral English because it increases comprehension and makes literacy more accessible. In addition, remember that Joan and Dawn, *later language learners* in Spanish, still need their primary language. People all around the world like to use their primary language. It increases comprehension and makes literacy more accessible.

One other change we make in California is that we say specially-designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE), instead of sheltered English or sheltered content instruction. *Intermediate language learners*, in particular, need lots of good SDAIE or sheltered content instruction. It increases comprehension and makes literacy more accessible. Once again, for us it doesn't matter what terminology is used. What does matter is for teachers to understand the importance of making content and language meaningful for students who are in the process of acquiring English as

another language. Literacy is the goal, and there are various paths to literacy development.

When speaking with highly-resistant, English-only colleagues

Second, if we are with a group of highly-resistant, English-only mainstream classroom teachers, who for one reason or another have been mandated to come listen to us, we usually say something like:

The goal of bilingual education is English. If you have students who are dominant in languages other than English, you, too, are a part of bilingual education. We know you didn't plan it this way; we know this was not your career goal; we know that in some cases, you might not even want it this way, but this is the way it is.

Bilingual education is far more than bilingual teachers. It is pedagogically-grounded principals, secretaries, bus-drivers, board members and interested community members. If your community has students who speak other languages, you are a part of a bilingual/multilingual context. Each of you has talents and gifts to contribute. Each has something to offer to a total program for students. A total program includes:

- ESL,
- sheltered content instruction,
- primary language support, and
- mainstream experiences.

ESL is nothing more than oral English: It is speaking and listening; it is good chatting skills in English. ESL is important for early language learners of any age. If students

know very, very, little English, they desperately need a great oral English teacher. Early language learner needs are unique. Often, these learners are frightened because they don't have friends. They can't express themselves. The total school experience is overwhelming. What they need is good oral English with a great teacher who loves kids. Often primary teachers understand this need better than other staff members. They have studied the importance of language development. They understand the integration of ideas and words. They know that students need to feel safe as their language develops. They often know it takes time to acquire a language.

When speaking with language acquisition colleagues

Third if we are with a group of language acquisition specialists, and particularly embattled bilingual teachers, we listen; we affirm; we validate. We seek to create a healing context.

With bilingual educators, we facilitate a discussion of morally, politically, and ethically-grounded pedagogy. We are each challenged to act responsibly and morally based on our knowledge and experience. Bilingual teachers often have very comprehensive understandings of the social, cultural, and political context of language and learning. We cannot expect everyone to understand. It took us a long time to come to our understandings about languages, and we only learned it from students. We repeat: All language learners need conversational and academic language. All language learners need literacy.

What are the bilingual basics?

However, we have noticed that often in the grocery store or on a plane, we hear a different type of question. Sometimes people even ask questions about bilingual education though they don't really want to hear our answer. They want to tell us that 'this is America and kids need to learn English.' Incidentally, the answer to that is: 'Yes,' 'you're right,' 'yup,' 'sí,' or 'you betcha.' Because of this, we have tried to define the principles of language acquisition in short user-friendly language which might come in handy on planes or at family gatherings:

- English is the primary goal of bilingual education.
- Bilingual education is all about *literacy* and *knowledge*.
- The truth is that we can all stop worrying about the kids not getting conversational English. They're all doing it. We can't stop them. However, conversational English alone is not the answer. Our job, as teachers, is to focus on academic language.
- Kids can't learn what they don't understand. Me neither.
- Knowing your first language really well makes learning a second language easier and faster.
- Lots of first language literacy is a great indicator of success in school.
- Poverty is a great roadblock to literacy and knowledge; our job is to level the playing field while the kids are with us in school.
- People around the world feel strongly about their first language. Why not? It is how we all originally received love from our parents and families. It is okay to love your first language. It is okay for everyone to love their first language.

- Being bilingual is not bad. In fact, it is very good.
- Students must be prepared for a world we can only imagine. Students need to be able to pose and solve problems with technology, which stretches beyond our wildest thoughts. Being able to do this in more than one language will be an advantage.

Above all, the students who will succeed socially and economically are those who will be able to thrive in a multilingual world. And, when that day comes, it will still be okay for each of us to have strong feelings about our first language.

¹ This article is adapted from Chapter Six of:

Wink, J., & Wink, D. (2004). *Teaching passionately: What's love got to do with it?* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

A complete summary of the research is available as an annotated bibliography at the end of Chapter Six of the book. It is also available at www.JoanWink.com: Just click on the book cover icon.