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Defining Bilingual Education in Various Contexts

Through the years, we have had the opportunity to define bilingual education on many occasions. Our definitions are not meant to be memorized. They are contextually grounded because we have noticed that we adapt them to fit the context. For example, what we say in an in-service might differ a little from what we say during Thanksgiving dinner with family and friends. Our definitions are also grounded in narratives. As educators, we feel we are each called on to find the power of the narrative to make our complex pedagogical understandings more meaningful to the public. As a bilingual teacher educator (Joan) and a bilingual educator (Dawn), we notice that we get to explain 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.

As we begin the following narratives, we first want to provide some of our understandings of English as a second language (ESL) and sheltered content instruction. ESL, which is known as English language development (ELD) in some areas, focuses on the development of conversational language for students who are not yet speaking English. The goal 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. The goal is to make grade-level content (math, social studies, science) understandable and meaningful for nonnative speakers of English. Academic language is used to link prior knowledge and experiences with the generation of new concepts and cognition. The students are often intermediate language learners.

First, if we are in an in-service 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. *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.

When we do an in-service in California, we make small changes to fit the context. For example, in California when we are talking about *early language learners* and their need for good oral English, instead of saying 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 oral language 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, as it will increase comprehension and make literacy more accessible. In addition, remember 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 matters is that teachers understand the importance of making content and language meaningful for students who are in the process of acquiring English as another language.

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, 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 the student knows very little English, they desperately need a great oral English teacher. Early language learner needs are unique. Often the learners are frightened because they don't have friends. They can't express themselves. The total school experience is overwhelming. Good oral English with a great teacher who loves kids is what is needed. Often primary teachers understand this need better than others on the staff. 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.

At other times, we have found the best ESL teachers to be those who have taught about 10 years and are looking for new challenges. They now understand the system, kids, and their own pedagogy. They often are eager to apply their knowledge of teaching and learning in new contexts.

ESL teachers or oral language teachers, do not necessarily have to speak other languages in addition to English. It is great if they do, but it is not necessary. It is important that the teacher be caring and pedagogically grounded.

Sheltered content instruction, often referred to as sheltered English, is another important part of bilingual education. It is important, in particular, for the *intermediate language learner*.

Good sheltered content is for the student who has been here awhile and is well along in oral English development. Sheltered content is for the student who can speak and understand conversational English but still needs support in the more demanding content areas. It is often very helpful if the sheltered content teacher understands and even speaks the language of the learner, but it is not absolutely necessary. A good sheltered content teacher needs to understand the process of language acquisition. This could very well be a mainstream teacher who understands that there is a difference between conversational and academic language, who understands that it takes a long time to acquire a language, who understands that all students need access to the core curriculum, and who understands that this is still a very difficult and challenging experience for the intermediate language learner.

In any school setting, there are always teachers with much to offer students. However, sometimes there is a limited number of teachers who speak the multiple languages of the students. Difficult decisions have to be made. The pedagogical principle guiding these decisions is: How best can we meet the needs of all students and effectively use the multiple human resources at the site? In a school district with a limited number of bilingual teachers, the first principle is to get the bilingual teachers to the site closest to the bilingual students. Link the students' needs with the human resources in the district.

The students need to continue learning; education is the bedrock of bilingual education. The students need access to core curriculum. If they cannot yet learn the new content in English, they need to learn it in a language they understand. Primary or heritage language instruction is the one part of an entire bilingual program where we must have teachers who speak the language of the students. This is another unique pedagogical skill designed to serve the complex needs of language learners.

Students who are in the process of acquiring English also need to be integrated with students in the mainstream classes. All students need to be with all students. Of course, we cannot do this for six hours of each day, but certainly for part of the bilingual program, all students need to come together to learn and to also learn about each other. We often fear what we don't understand. Again, the teacher does not have to be bilingual or multilingual. But, hopefully, this is a caring and pedagogically grounded teacher whose expertise is bringing students together and creating safe and challenging dynamics where all students inquire into knowledge and seek answers together. These teachers tend to have very noisy classrooms. They also tend to adore teaching and learning. Above all, they are grounded in justice and equity.

Just as bilingual teachers bring unique talents to facilitate learning in a whole program, so, too, do English-dominant teachers bring unique talents, serving the greater community of learners. No student knows it all; no student can do it all; no teacher knows it all; no teacher can do it all. None of us can do it alone. Each of us must contribute our unique gift. Each of us has hidden human resources.

Third, if we are with a group of 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 our 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.

To this point, we have shared with you answers to the question: What is bilingual education? Our definitions are contextually grounded in narratives of our experiences. We will conclude this section with two other definitions.

Remember Professor Beto from the beginning of the book? He always said that bilingual education is all about education that happens to be in two languages. This definition serves as a great cognitive coat hook on which to hang further understandings. Later in the semester Professor Beto would add to his definition: Bilingual education is all about literacy and knowledge. That's it: literacy and knowledge; literacy and knowledge.

Krashen (1996) states that bilingual education consists of good, comprehensible input in English, good subject matter teaching in the primary language, and continued literacy development in the primary language. Given these three components, kids will get literacy and knowledge (pp. 3-4).