

How Are Dual Language Teachers Pivoting to Overcome Challenges? Evidence-based Strategies for Bilingual English-Spanish Instruction

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Summary: This article addresses dual language teachers' essential competencies along with promising practices that support additive biliteracy and academic language development in both Spanish and English. The goal is to offer recommendations that enhance dual language instruction based on lessons learned throughout the current school year.

Keywords: dual language, instructional practice, biliteracy, additive bilingual pedagogical skills, bilingual teachers' professional development

Introduction

After consecutive periods of unpredictable academic achievement outcomes for English learners, districts across the country are rethinking instructional delivery methods and best practices for language learners. The goal of this paper is to provide recommendations that enhance dual language instruction delivery methods, including highly effective specialized strategies for all remote and face-to-face learning modalities targeting biliteracy language development. These recommendations stem from daily interactions with Dual Language Immersion (DLI) students and teachers. Initially, a collection of data was reviewed and then validated by practitioners who contributed their responses regarding critical instructional factors that impact students' academic achievement when learning in two languages.

Purpose

Despite the number of current and past research studies in support of the benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy (Cloud, Genesee & Hamayan, 2000), recent program implementation challenges could jeopardize the future of language learning programs. According to the Century Foundation publication of February 04, 2021: "Nearly all teachers share concerns that many English Learners (ELs) are impacted from interrupted learning, anxieties, stress, and sometimes the trauma they experienced during the pandemic." The Office of Civil Rights, June 2021 report, Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students, confirms these concerns under Observation #3 of this publication, which

states, "Districts in fall 2020 saw similarly sharp increases in failing grades among English learners" (p. 21).

This paper examines the question: How can we instill a love of learning in our students who are second language learners? Bilingual educators teaching in English/Spanish Dual Language programs are challenged daily to accomplish learning goals in two languages by fostering interest in the students' multicultural context while at the same time maintaining high motivation for the joy of biliteracy. Therefore, the information shared in this paper includes

1. field-based informal classroom observations,
2. bilingual teachers' survey responses, and
3. input from professionals in the field.

These series of verifications support a thorough analysis of methods and strategies that result in increased student outcomes (Collier & Thomas, 2009; Thomas & Collier, 2012).

In search of ways to replicate effective examples of teaching and learning in bilingual settings, field observations were explored in order to identify potential critical components of professional development necessary to support dual language learners for both pre-service and in-service practitioners. Although teachers working in dual language classrooms are faced with students' countless layers of diversity and complexity (Hamayan, Genesee, & Cloud, 2013; Ovando & Collier, 1998; Valdés, 1997), this paper hopes to be able to make at least a contribution to bilingual instructional practices that aim to positively shape pedagogical patterns by focusing on enhancing students' bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural learning goals.

Methodology

Working with a Texas-based school system that offers Dual Language Immersion as their institutionalized model, bilingual teachers from 13 different K-5 campuses were offered the opportunity to participate. Bilingual teachers at this institution prioritize a target language, which is used as the language of instruction based on each content area taught.

Initially, practitioners were invited to gather a list of common considerations based on their instructional experiences. The elements included in this list were used to examine patterns during classroom observations. Finally, the commonalities found were treated as the most repeatedly identified struggles during online and hybrid instruction. These were narrowed to specific factors to be connected to available scholarships, such as students' level of attention and motivation; students' ability to follow directions and engage in equal participation; students' ability to accurately demonstrate their learning; and teachers' competence in independent work evaluation.

These common underlying factors were then grouped into categories that helped to identify the teachers' own perceptions and experiences that connected these factors with second language learning. For example, if the factor to be studied was "motivation", the teachers needed to identify how important motivation was in their daily lessons. Based on their response, they also identified the level of motivation observed in their online instruction when specific variables were integrated (digital content vs. hands-on experiences). All factors in the study, combined with the teachers' perceptions, were then transformed into instructional delivery guidelines to be used in language (L2) learning settings.

The "Right Recipe" in Action

In this section, the initial list of most repeatedly identified struggles was presented in terms of factors that impact remote and hybrid learning objectives. Each factor included in the study is described in connection to second language development research, but most importantly the factors are validated by bilingual teachers and their English-teaching counterparts who work in teams as "bilingual-teacher pairs".

The level of motivation impacts the way students pay attention to the lessons.

Not surprisingly, teachers of second language learners pointed to motivation as a prerequisite for optimal levels of attention. The leading theory of motivation in language learning, Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, argues that motivation includes "affective variables" such as emotion, desire, attitude, and effort. These factors are clearly different from cognitive abilities, but also account for individual differences in second language achievement

(Gardner and MacIntyre, 1992). Gardner also emphasizes that it is the active learner, the student who engages with the learning experience, who can be considered motivated.

Teachers' Statements in Reference to Motivation

The statements collected about each common factor reflect the teachers' responses that best describe what they underwent during remote learning. These commonalities are

- It is harder to keep students motivated in remote learning lessons.
- The level of attention of some students diminishes after a while.
- Students who are second language learners (L2) tend to stop paying attention sooner.
- It is relatively easy to increase motivation when learning stations and hands-on experiences are incorporated into the lessons.
- Students who are second language learners can focus and pay attention when working on hands-on activities.

The level of attention impacts the way students follow instructions and participate.

Bilingual teachers could face an added challenge when it comes to student participation and response since dual language immersion programs (like the model in this institution) demand loyalty to the language of instruction.

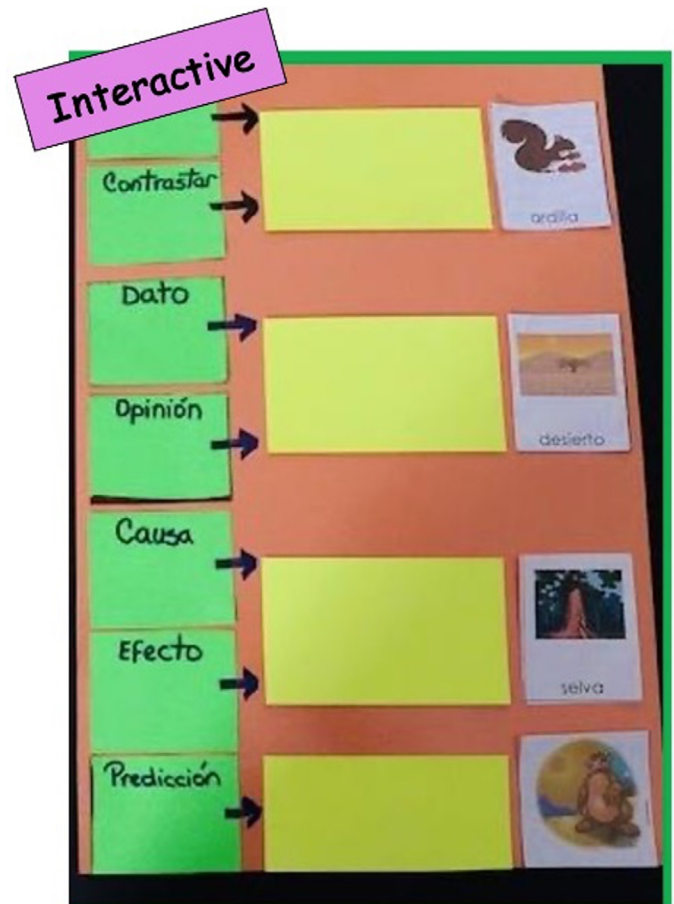


Image 1: An interactive anchor chart for a review of reading comprehension strategies

However, the participants shared that they frequently wondered if the reason why students are not responding is simply that they still do not understand the target language with any degree of proficiency. This situation can result in a teacher switching constantly to the students' first language (L1) in search of more optimal communication but jeopardizing the goals of the second language (L2) acquisition. For learning to occur, the learner needs to pay attention. There is no difference in learning within the second language (L2) classrooms where teachers make instructional decisions to entice the attention of their students. This need to keep students' attention can be achieved using the teacher's use of voice, pauses, gestures, and facial expressions when using the target language to direct learners' attention and aid comprehension (Wang, 2015; Linck, Osthus, Koeth, and Bunting, 2014). According to Krashen (1985), this type of comprehensible input is what learners need to acquire a new language. Let's examine how to keep students' attention during instruction delivery using a lesson application example (see Image 1) which illustrates how to increase intrinsic motivation while enhancing student engagement, targeting optimal levels of attention.

In order to support the bilingual teachers in this institution, we set up a four-step support process that aimed to provide bilingual teachers with personalized assistance.

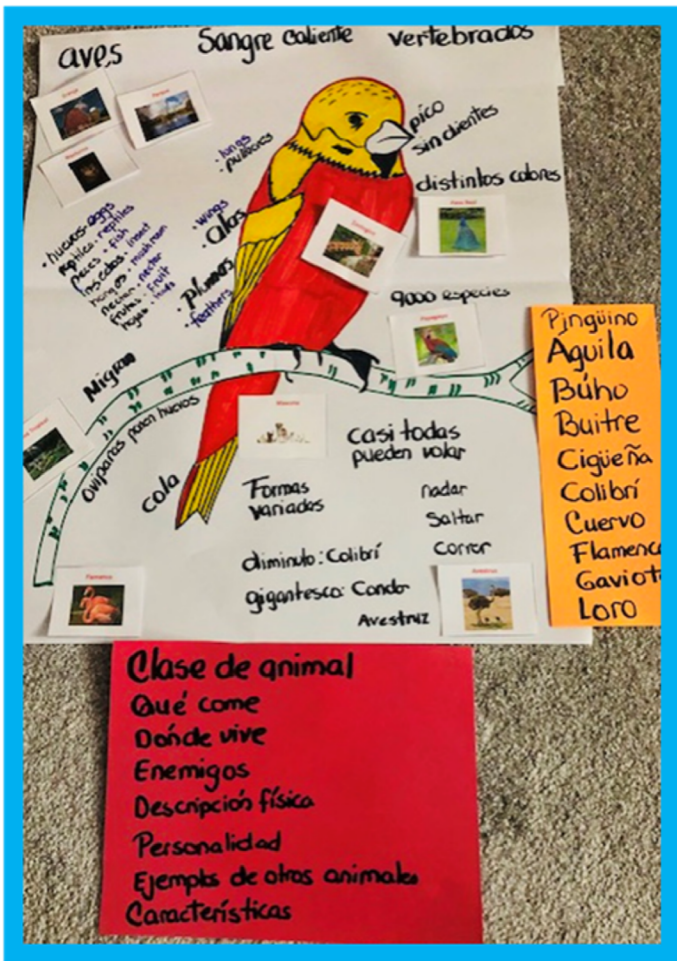


Image 2: A pictorial for bridging strategies

These steps included observation, debriefing, consultation, and coaching. During teachers' coaching periods, participants were provided with guidance from our subject-matter experts to include hands-on experiences during remote or face-to-face instruction. The bilingual coaches who are experts in the field have a background of successful teaching experience with second language learners and professional development hours dedicated to the use of hands-on strategies. Our bilingual teacher, Mariely (all names are pseudonyms), incorporated the use of an interactive anchor chart as shown in the example in Image 1. She invited students to complete the activity first by modeling together as follows:

“Usaremos palabras de vocabulario que aparecerán después en nuestra lectura. ¿Qué quiere decir comparar y contrastar? En el dibujo hay una ardilla. Si imaginamos un ratón... ¿Qué podemos decir es igual y qué es diferente entre una ardilla y un ratón?” (Translation: *“We will use vocabulary words that will appear later in our reading. What does it mean to compare and contrast? In the drawing, there is a squirrel. If we imagine a mouse, what can we say is the same and what is the difference between a squirrel and a mouse?”*) As she writes the key terminology in the yellow area, she directs the students to use sticky notes, construction paper, and one index card to create a chart mirroring the model. Students learning remotely are assigned different parts of the interactive chart as follows: *“Grupo 1: dato y opinión; grupo 2: causa y efecto; grupo 3: predicción”* (*“Group 1: fact and opinion; group 2: cause and effect; group 3: prediction”*). Each student shares their completed task using their own camera and Mariely screenshares using “check marks” to show a completed interactive vocabulary anchor chart as a pre-reading activity.

In the next part of the study, bilingual teachers measure students' participation levels using hands-on activities that follow the gradual release model introduced previously. First, the teacher models, and then the students are assigned their tasks. To reinforce learning, all students' contributions are brought together as a whole group activity, and finally, each step is displayed in the lesson sequence.

Teachers' Statements Concerning Student Participation

It is harder to keep students participating and completing their work in remote learning lessons.

Some students struggle to follow directions and complete their assignments on time.

It is easier to follow directions and participate when using routines and hands-on experiences.

Most students participate and complete assignments when lessons include routines that involve hands-on activities.

The level of student interaction and participation impacts the results of the assessment and/or independent work.

Instructions for students learning a new language need to integrate all domains of language; therefore student participation and interaction are essential components of the lesson cycle. More importantly, however, evaluation of students' progress must be observable. From Krashen's Comprehensible Input (1985) to Swain's Comprehensible Output (1995) and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), research has highlighted language acquisition as a process.

The example in Image 2 illustrates how to increase students' participation while maintaining a manageable learning climate that supports individual students' language acquisition process.

During teachers' coaching periods, participants were provided with guidance from our subject matter experts to include a pictorial as the hands-on purposeful activity center. Tammy is a bilingual teacher who adopted the 4-role student's assignments as follows: Students were numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4 and each number received a specific task that made participation equitable and manageable. During the lesson, Tammy said, *"Estudiantes con el número 1 van a repetir las instrucciones de esta actividad en su equipo; estudiantes con el número 2 van a venir adelante a recibir los materiales que usaremos para preparar un elemento pictórico como enseña este ejemplo; los que tienen el número 3 van a utilizar la rúbrica que evalúa si todos los pasos están completos; los alumnos con el número 4 van a crear las preguntas que guían el propósito del cartel"*

("Students with number 1 will repeat the instructions of this activity in their team; students with number 2 will come forward to receive the materials that we will use to prepare a pictorial element as this example shows; those who have the number 3 will use the rubric that evaluates if all the steps are complete; the students with the number 4 will create the questions that guide the purpose of this chart").

Providing students with the opportunity to handcraft a purposeful activity center allows for a direct connection between cognitive skills and language learning as shown in Figure 1.

Conclusion

This study has been instrumental in providing valid recommendations to enhance dual language instruction delivery methods by effectively offering ways to combine digital and hands-on strategies that support remote and face-to-face learning modalities. Evidently in Dual Language settings, targeting language acquisition is a major goal along with achieving all learning objectives. In this paper, bilingual educators used their own lesson delivery experiences to monitor a direct connection between language learning and cognitive skills by using hands-on experiences to integrate highly effective strategies and instill students' love for learning. Keeping this balance in dual language education results in high levels of motivation, increased student interest, and optimal student participation.

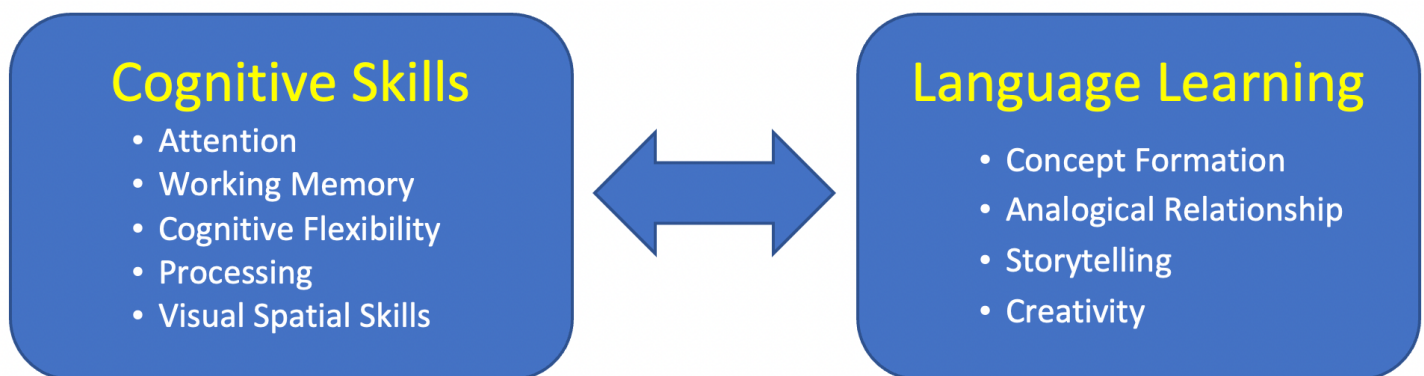


Figure 1: The connection between cognitive skills and language learning

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