Sink or Swim? A Look into an English Immersion Class

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Sometimes I don’t understand the teacher in English. I like to speak Spanish in the classroom when I don’t understand something.

One of my English Language Learner (ELL) students told me this about her experience in our English immersion class that had primary language support from me, the teacher. Another student told me that she liked having a teacher who spoke Spanish to help her when she needed help with understanding. Yet, she developed into a very expressive speaker of English. However, another student told me that he felt embarrassed speaking English but not when he spoke in Spanish. Although he made incredible progress this year, speaking more English than at the beginning of the year, I wonder if he would have had the same successes in another class where only English was used.

In the last few years, California has begun to immerse our ELL students in English, nearly eliminating bilingual programs. In June 1997, before the later approval of Proposition 227, the State Attorney General summarized the following key points of the proposed measure initiating English as the required language of instruction:

(d) WHEREAS the public schools of California currently do a poor job of educating immigrant children, wasting financial resources on costly experimental language programs whose failure over the past two decades is demonstrated by the current high drop-out rates and low English literacy levels of many immigrant children; and

(e) WHEREAS young immigrant children can easily acquire full fluency in a new language, such as English, if they are heavily exposed to that language in the classroom at an early age.

(f) THEREFORE it is resolved that: all children in California public schools shall be taught English as rapidly and effectively as possible.

Article 1 in Chapter 3, Part 1 of the Educational Code
I also believe that our students should learn English but I stumble for the solution to the complex question How do we educate our English learners? With Proposition 227 passing in 1998, this question was addressed and a solution was proposed: California public schools would implement structured English immersion programs.

Since 1998 with the implementation of Proposition 227, parents throughout Los Angeles Unified School District, LAUSD, have had the option to enroll their ELL child in an English immersion class with primary language support provided by the teacher. For the past two years, I have been teaching an English immersion class in which I was able to provide instructional support in Spanish, my students' primary language. After my first year teaching such a class, I was intrigued by my experiences and wanted to know if immersion with primary language support was really working. I joined the UCLA Teacher-Researcher Program in order to explore and question the value of primary language support in my first grade, model B English immersion class: Would the use of spoken Spanish, my students' native language, help my students learn English and important first grade skills?

The year before, two of my students, Daniel and Erica, surprised me. Erica, an ELL first grader, spoke mostly Spanish to me in our English immersion class. Her mother requested that I speak more English to her, so I did, but Erica continued to speak Spanish. Was this process helping her to learn English? Daniel was a Kindergarten student in my Kindergarten/First Grade class, along with Erica. After about a week in my class, I was alerted that Daniel, a student identified as Fluent English Proficient (IFEP) at the time of enrollment, was misplaced in my class. Although his parents spoke Spanish and English, they had chosen to speak to Daniel in English at home. His parents decided to keep him in my class because Daniel was very comfortable. I felt complimented but was perplexed to find that at the end of the year Daniel had started speaking Spanish to his classmates and family. His English speaking skills remained good and he achieved grade level skills. How did this happen in my English Immersion class?
Perhaps, the language support was not helping my students to learn English or, at least, not speak English. Perhaps, the language support helped my students.

**About Proposition 227**

Proposition 227, passed in July 1998, states that Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) students, now called ELL students, in California must be instructed in English. Students would experience English immersion. Some districts organized their English immersion programs so ELL students would be pulled out of their classes for English Language Development (ELD). In LAUSD, the main two choices for English immersion were Model A and Model B. Neither was a pull out class. The major distinction between model A and B is that a model B teacher is qualified to teach using special methods in English and in the primary language. In a model B class, the instruction by the teacher is primarily in English but the primary language could be used to develop concepts. The teacher of a model A class is also qualified to teach academic classes using special methods in English but language clarification would come from the paraprofessional, who, in the case of our school, is not with the same class the entire day. If parents of ELL students wanted a traditional bilingual program, they would have to request that choice using a waiver. Parents also had the option to enroll their ELL child in a mainstream class, also referred to as English Only (EO), designed for Fluent English Proficient (FEP) students.

**Our School**

Selma Avenue Elementary, a Title 1 LAUSD school, in the heart of Hollywood, California, has approximately 800 Pre-Kindergarten through Fifth grade students. All of our students are offered free breakfasts and lunches. Approximately 90% of our students are Hispanic, 5% African American, 2% Caucasian, and 3% other. During the two years after the
implementation of Proposition 227, each grade from Kindergarten to third has had one English Only, two model A, and three model B classes with some split grade

Data Collection

I assessed the students the first day of school to determine how they wrote their name, counted, and identified numbers. Only one student had difficulty writing his last name and most students identified the numbers one through twenty in English. At three times during the school year in October, February, and June, I assessed the students using first grade informative and creative writing prompts based on The Letter from the core literature book, *Frog and Toad*. I wrote anecdotal notes about the students and maintained portfolios of student work. Reading fluency and comprehension were assessed approximately every eight weeks. In June, I surveyed students and parents about their experiences with the English immersion program.

How Much Primary Language Support?

Our principal informed us that as model B teachers in LAUSD we could use approximately 25% of the student’s primary language during instruction, mainly to preview the lessons. According to the LAUSD handbook *Instruction and Implementation of Proposition 227*, primary language may be used to facilitate adjustment to the structured English immersion classroom, to explain emergency procedures, and to assist with comprehension of instruction. Another statement in this handbook stated that teachers are accountable for providing instructional opportunities for students to work toward the goal of achieving reasonable fluency in one year. I felt conflicted between facilitating comprehension and achieving fluency. I could see how Spanish would facilitate comprehension. However, Spanish support would seem to prevent the achievement of fluency in English, at least, full fluency.

In my classroom, I always felt aware of when I used Spanish or when I did not use Spanish. I felt more pressure to prepare my students for the state standardized exam, California
Stanford 9, which was to be administered in English without language support. Also, standards based promotion had started in the second grade. Students would be retained if they did not achieve the necessary standards. In addition, our school adopted a structured reading program, Success For All, that did not provide primary language support. The reading classes were grouped homogeneously according to reading levels. Some of my model B homeroom students went to classes with teachers who did not speak their primary language. At different times during the school year, I had a combination of students from English Only, model A and model B classes in my reading class. This 90-minute period was not to be supported with the students primary language. However, in teaching other subjects such as math, science, writing, and social studies, Spanish could be used.

About My Class

All of my students last year, the second year of English immersion, were English Language Learners with Spanish as their primary, dominant language. Their English Language Development levels were one, Beginning, and two, Early Intermediate, on a scale of one to five. Like the previous year, some students code-switched which means they alternated between two languages. In this case, they alternated between Spanish and English. For my research, I considered these students as English-Spanish co-dominant. Some students did not code-switch frequently and used mostly Spanish or mostly English with me. I considered these students as Spanish dominant or English dominant. For my research, I wanted to know how primary language would affect all my students, including those who had different comfort levels speaking English. To accomplish this, I focused on the following students:

Spanish Dominant:
Ana had been in a model B Kindergarten class. She was very alert and enjoyed participating in class activities. Ana understood the concepts taught in English. At the beginning
of the year, she was limited to a phrase in English. Her spoken English improved a little to where she chose to speak one or two sentences in English. However, her dominant choice in speaking continued to be Spanish. At the end of the year, she told me that she would have rather been with a teacher who spoke only English. I did speak in English. She spoke in Spanish. In June, I asked her whether she wanted to do the survey in Spanish or English and she chose Spanish. In this survey, Ana told me, Me encanto hablar inglés para aprender en inglés. (I love speaking in English to learn English) She thought it was important to learn English porque tengo que aprender porque si mi familia no entiende yo les puedo explicar. (because I need to learn because if my family does not understand I could explain to them). Her ELD level changed from a one to a two. Ana became a reader and a writer, and she was able to write complete sentences in English.

**Alex** spoke only Spanish to the other students and me. He enrolled in our school in February below first grade level in all areas including his Spanish speaking abilities according to the Woodcock-Muñoz Survey. His formal schooling began the previous October and since that time, he had attended two other schools other than our school. Alex was first placed in a mainstream class because all of the other model A and B classes at our school were full. In grades Kindergarten through 3, classes could not exceed 20 students. However, we were able to accommodate Alex in my model B class by switching a student from my class into the mainstream, English Only class. After the switch, Alex told me he felt much better being in my class where he could speak in Spanish. After four months in my class, Alex was still unable to recognize all of the letters, but he learned to recognize the numbers one through twenty in English and add and subtract. These were skills he was unable to do upon entering. However, he will repeat first grade next year because he lacks the skills for second grade. The other students in my study will not be retained.

**English-Spanish Co-Dominant:**
**Eduardo**, from a model B Kindergarten class, was inquisitive and very verbal. When he spoke to me, he would speak English and then switch sporadically into Spanish. In February, Eduardo, with parental consent, switched classes to a class with first and second graders and a teacher who did not speak Spanish. I needed to switch one student out of my class because another student needed to be moved into my class. I chose Eduardo because of his math abilities and eagerness to learn. Also, Eduardo and his parents were willing to switch while three other families I spoke to did not want to switch this late in the year because their child was so comfortable in my class. I spoke to Eduardo in June about how he felt about the switch. During this survey, Eduardo spoke to me in English and did not switch into Spanish. He said that there were times when he didn't understand the teacher because of language. He would ask his table partner and consequently get in trouble. He also said that he struggled with reading. He wanted to be in a class where the teacher speaks English and Spanish because he doesn't completely understand in English. His ELD level remained two.

**English Dominant:**

**Sam**, also from a model B Kindergarten class, spoke comfortably to me in English. He was a meticulous, well-behaved student and started the year as a reader. He spoke to me in English with some grammatical errors but was understood. For example, Sam said,  *I want to take this book to house to learn.*  He used  *house* instead of  *home*. In March, Sam switched to a mainstream, English Only class to accommodate Alex switching into my class. With parental consent, Sam switched into a class where there were both Spanish and non-Spanish speakers in the class. He was very successful in the class according to the teacher. Sam told me that he didn't find the switch difficult and said that he always understood, even in English. He said that it doesn't matter whether his teacher speaks in Spanish. His ELD level changed to a three which is intermediate.
Positive Outcomes of First Language Use and Support in My Classroom

I started the first day of class, speaking English. Then, I decided to take a poll: How many of my students wanted me to speak Spanish? Fifteen out of nineteen did. By doing this, I established myself to my students as someone they could talk to in either Spanish or English. Students could, and would, code-switch, speaking some English and some Spanish. According to researcher A.C. Zentella, if we ban code switching, we do not know what we are banning along with it.

During the school year, how I used Spanish varied. Sometimes I would explain in English and a student would translate in Spanish or the other way. Sometimes after I would explain in English and ask a question, I would get blank stares and no responses, so I would use Spanish. I switched my format so students would not tune out the English explanations in anticipation for the Spanish. I found that using Spanish in the classroom as a support had many benefits for my students and me such as:

To Affirm Understanding: Proof that My Students Did or Did Not Understand

In my reading class, students sometimes chose to speak in Spanish to answer a question. Often, I would repeat their point in English. Although these students were assessed in English to determine their reading levels, their speaking in Spanish definitely helped me as their teacher determine their understanding of what we were reading or discussing. For example, during a reading lesson, we encountered the word shell in the context of baking a cake.

Teacher to the class: What are shells?
Ana: La cascara del huevo. (The shell of an egg.)

Ana responded to the question using Spanish. Could she have used English to explain the meaning? I grappled with that then and I still do. In this situation, Ana’s use of Spanish let me know that she knew what we were discussing. She was participating in class, understanding English. Would this help her to speak in English? Or, would it be better for her not to speak at all if she could not or would not speak in English?
To Extract Details and Explain

Students would sometimes switch into Spanish to give further explanation. For example, Ana showed me her journal and said, This is my house. I m done. Then in Spanish she described the chimney. She would often elaborate in Spanish what she had difficulty expressing in English.

Eduardo showed me his journal about Halloween in October.

Teacher: What is this?
Eduardo: This is a matian. (He meant Dalmatian.)
T: What colors are you going to use?
E: Will you give me a color white and black?
¿Los de LA s Best pueden traer disfraz?
T: After school?
E: Oh yo me voy a vestir de indio. I m going to be an Indian. [Note: He translated into English after saying his sentence in Spanish first.]

To engage the students

The librarian from the public library visited our class to make a presentation. She spoke in English, and Alex, who did not speak English, got up from the rug to go somewhere else. I asked him in Spanish why he got up and he told me because he did not understand the librarian. At that point, I asked one of my students to translate for him. He then paid attention to the librarian s presentation. Because of incidents like this, when I would present lessons to the class, I would think of Alex and preview the lesson in Spanish.

To Discuss Problems

Most behavioral problems and upset feelings occurred on the playground during recess. When students started to talk about these problems English was used a little but most times, amid tears, Spanish was the language that my students spoke. One student told me in Spanish about an incident that I had to report to Child Services for possible abuse. I know this student did not have the English vocabulary to tell me about his problem. Spanish, his primary language, was his voice.
To help students write

Many of our writing activities such as thank-you notes, student of the week books, and daily news involved oral discussion first. I would post a piece of chart paper on the whiteboard with the students seated on the rug or in their chairs. Students would tell me what should be written. If a student spoke in Spanish, we would discuss how that could be written in English. In this way, students of all language abilities could participate. As a class, we added words to our word wall which was written in English and accessible to the students. When we would write, students would consult the word wall or other resources such as books or posters to find words. My students had familiarity with these resources because we consulted them together first. Based on the writing assessments and other writing samples, many of my students learned how to express themselves in English and find a way to say what they wanted using English.

Journals were used in my class for my students not only to write but to discuss what was written. When we worked on journals, one to two times a week for 30 minutes, language support helped students express themselves. Sometimes students would tell me what they wanted to write in Spanish and then, together, we would find the words to write their ideas in English. After students wrote, two students would read their journals to the class. Then, students were called to repeat what was heard and ask questions about what else they wanted to know. The questions asked became more complex and specific to the topic. The oral sharing allowed all students to be involved, regardless of language ability, and to practice listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills.
Student Achievement

Written Expression

In this writing activity, students were asked to write about how they would spend an afternoon with Frog and Toad, the characters from the story The Letter.

In Ana's first writing assessment in October, she dictated a party. She lacked the skills to explain her picture or ideas thoroughly.

At the end of first grade in June, Ana responds to the same prompt with much more detail.
Implications for Teaching

Is language support helpful or not?

I think that most of my first graders benefited from language support. Their parents thought so and noticed that their children were speaking more English at the end of the year. Some students like Alex required more Spanish than others such as Sam. As their teacher, I benefited because I was able to know whether the students understood our activity.

I worry that as schools and districts adopt more guided, scripted programs such as Open Court and Success For All some students will be excluded because they do not yet have the English to express themselves or understand the lessons. I worry that if these students do not have opportunity for language support, we as educators will not know their true understanding of what we are teaching.

Did the English immersion program work? My students did not become perfectly fluent in English, but I don't think we can say that their being in a model B class caused them not to achieve fluency. Perhaps, one reason that students did not achieve fluency was that we as teachers did not have ample preparation to review the ELD materials before implementation since the materials were distributed to us throughout year. Perhaps, one year is not enough time to achieve fluency, even in an English immersion program regardless of primary language support.

Now, after my second year with this English immersion program, I think about Erica and Daniel. They were my two surprises during the first year of the program. Erica responded in Spanish to English conversation. Daniel was an IFEP student who started speaking Spanish. Did they benefit from being in an immersion class with language support? I must say yes. Erica understood the English, otherwise, she would not have responded in Spanish. Daniel had a chance to develop another language.
Should Language Support Continue?

I hope primary language support continues and that teachers support students with their primary language to help students fill the gaps they may have. At a certain point students, like Sam, are ready to be successful in a mainstream class. However, for many of my five, six, and seven-year old students, Spanish has helped them communicate with me and facilitate their comprehension. I hope we give this option of primary language support a chance before we eliminate it and allow our ELL students to sink or swim without any language support.

My students made incredible progress this year. Many achieved grade level standards, but did they fail because they did not become fluent in English? Is one year a reasonable expectation for an ELL student to mainstream into a class designed for Fluent English Proficient students? Currently, the decision of language support is up to the parent but I suppose the program offerings in LAUSD may change and consequently our students may not have the opportunity to have classes with primary language support. Many ELL students may sink in a sink or swim approach when all they really need is a little help.
Resources


*English Language Development: A Teacher Handbook Created By Teachers For Teachers.* Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Unified School District, Division of Instruction, Publication No. EC-642.