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Celebrating Children's Linguistic Genius

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It was my youngest son's last day of preschool. He had spent the last two magical years in a Spanish immersion program in Oakland and it was finally coming to an end. We were walking towards a circle of children and teachers and I was trying to talk to him about how he felt.

Me: *Hoy es el último día de clases en esta escuelita. ¿Cómo te sientes?*

Him: *No sé.*

Me: *Me siento triste, porque ha sido una escuela buenisima.*

Him: *I feel a little triste and a little feliz. But I think you feel triste-er than me.*

A few short years ago, I would have said my son was speaking Spanglish and rushed to correct his Spanish. I believed, as many others did, that "mixing" or "code-switching" indicated a deficit in my son's language development. However, on that day, I was able to recognize the brilliance of what his young brain was doing. After a beat, I responded,

Me: *Me encanta como estás practicando tu español. Eres muy inteligente e hiciste una cosa ingeniosa. Dijiste "triste-er", como decimos "sadder" en inglés. Pero en español es diferente, decimos más triste. Y es verdad, amor, siento más triste que tú.*

Him: *OK, Mama, OK.*

That I was able to respond to my son in this way, marked a personal response to a huge shift in bilingual education. I first became a teacher in the wake of Proposition 227, which effectively outlawed most of California's bilingual programming. Over the last 20 years of being in bilingual education in California, I've seen many teachers affected, like I was, by a misunderstanding of the bilingual brain. I've looked at writing samples with my fellow teachers, who bemoaned the fact that

their students were spelling *them*, as "dem" or that Spanish-speaking students wrote "*the toys of my brother*" rather than "*my brother's toys*." Early on, I knew there was something unfair in this deficit

perspective, but at that point I wasn't sure how to articulate it, let alone defend it to them.

Luckily for our children, tireless advocates, educators, and researchers in the field of dual language education have worked hard to align best practices with current research. After two decades, the passage of statewide

Proposition 58 effectively overturned Proposition 227, and a new English Learner Roadmap policy for California set dual language competencies as a goal of education. We are in a whole new policy context. Likewise, my own understanding of what it means to have and use a bilingual brain has evolved as well. I am now able to see that my son was doing what emerging bilingual people around the world do when learning a new language: he was approximating, using a grammatical rule from his home language and applying it to his second language. Using my own bilingualism as a reference, I was able to understand what he was doing and celebrate its genius.

As bilingual teachers during the days of Proposition 227, my colleagues and I were often isolated in our practice and surrounded by a system disconnected from best practices for English learners or emerging bilinguals. Many of us had very little training in pedagogy specific to dual language classrooms and were unclear about the best way to organize our instruction in relationship to language. We had very little guidance in how to make decisions



The author's son and his classmates share a book in their Spanish immersion pre-school program.

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about what to teach in which language and why. Some teachers just repeated the same units in both English and Spanish, some separated their language instruction by curricular area, but there was little attention directed towards creating a thoughtful, research-based bilingual- and biliteracy-based trajectory that maximized school time and resources.

Certainly, we felt a strong responsibility to uphold the value and integrity of Spanish and push back against the creep of English dominance. What this looked like differed greatly from school to school and within each classroom. Often language percentages depended more on the language strength of each teacher rather than the allocation model. We had strict separation of languages. Some of us had models in which one teacher only spoke the target language to their students and pretended not to understand the other language. While this approach may have been a wonderful motivator for students to push themselves towards the target language, it didn't allow us to model our own bilingualism. It required us to trick our students into seeing us as monolingual, and didn't allow us to scaffold and support them in navigating the similarities and differences between their two languages. It was a best-intentioned attempt at combatting the inequity of language status in our society and schools, but as we became aware of new research and practices we asked ourselves: what if that's not the only way? What if we never have to shut off part of our brain? What if our first language actually makes us more effective in understanding and gaining literacy in our second language? What if we can celebrate our bilingualism as an asset to learning?



The teachers, together with their students, have created a chart that highlights the possessive in English and Spanish.

Through reading the work and attending workshops with many important researchers in the field of dual language, such as *Biliteracy from the Start* by Escamilla et al. (2014), *The Translanguaging Classroom* by García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017), *Teaching for Biliteracy* by Beeman and Urow (2013), and CAFE workshops with Dorta-Duque de Reyes, my understanding of what effective bilingual instruction should look like began to shift. I began to see that if we wanted students to have mastery of each language and the skills to move in and across their multiple language worlds proficiently and authentically, we needed to teach them how to do it. They needed to understand how their languages were similar and different. I needed to stop thinking of my students as two monolinguals in one body and shift to a bilingual mindset, with a different understanding of how students learn and use language. I finally began to see how making cross-language connections would not only strengthen their literacy skills in both languages, but profoundly affirm their bilingual, bicultural identity as they navigated across diverse cultural and linguistic spaces.

Our work as dual language educators is to understand and respect the fact that our students have a multitude of linguistic resources across

their languages. One implication for teachers is the need to carve out time to do this important cross-language work during instruction. Teachers can teach a whole lesson in Spanish during Spanish language arts in which students examine the differences in the use of possessives in Spanish and English. Students may participate bilingually but the

teacher stays in the language of that instructional block. Much of this work can also occur during English language development. By taking a closer look at how English works, students'

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understanding deepens and supports their ability to compare and contrast both languages, focusing on linguistic form and structure. It may involve looking at the two languages side by side and asking whether and how they work the same or differently. By doing this, knowledge of each language is improved, the brain's ability to move back and forth across the two languages is strengthened, and students discover the amazing diversity of cultural and human expression.

In addition to planned cross-language lessons, there are often moments that arise naturally in the classroom that lead to important “Ahas.” Teachers may respond to a student’s approximation, not by pointing out the error, but rather by acknowledging the student’s mastery of one language’s rules and trying them out in the new language. However, when those generalizations don’t hold to be true, students need to be taught the new rule for how it works in the other language. Those lessons must be explicit and direct and involve authentic practice to expand the students’ linguistic repertoire.

My own experiences as a bilingual teacher over the last 20 years, and the findings of many prominent practitioners and researchers, have led me to a better understanding of bilingual language development. Some language is acquired naturally, as the brain constructs rules and systems for each language and makes sense of them through interacting with proficient users of the language. But simply being immersed in a bilingual world is not enough. Research has shown that language and literacy development across two languages are greatly enhanced when there is an intentional

focus on supporting and teaching cross-language connections, and where students are engaged in activities that involve explicit contrastive analysis (Escamilla, Hopewell, Geisler, & Ruiz, 2007). In the past, teachers have left it up to students to discover these, but it is now clear that intentional, explicit instruction in lexical and grammatical similarities and differences helps children to be more successful in both their languages. When

we open up the academic space to allow for students to bring their whole selves to the learning, we also affirm their full identity and see their many cultures, languages, and experiences as integral and additive to the classroom community. Through making shifts in how we think about, plan for, instruct, and assess our bilingual and biliterate students, we can help them flourish and thrive as the linguistic geniuses they are.

For more information, please contact me at: heather@seal.org or visit <https://seal.org/>.



Students celebrate their bilingualism as part of their identity.

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