TEACHING FOR TRANSFER: CHALLENGING THE TWO SOLITUDES ASSUMPTION IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Two related assumptions regarding medium of instruction dominate second language teaching and bilingual education programs. Both of these assumptions reflect what Howatt (1984) terms “the monolingual principle.” In the case of second and foreign language teaching it is assumed that instruction should be carried out, as far as possible, exclusively in the target language without recourse to students’ first language (L1). In the case of bilingual and second language immersion programs, it has become axiomatic that the two languages should be kept rigidly separate. In this paper, I discuss the research and theoretical literature relevant to this “two solitudes” assumption and argue that it has minimal research basis. When we free ourselves from exclusive reliance on monolingual instructional approaches, a wide variety of opportunities arise for teaching bilingual students by means of bilingual instructional strategies that acknowledge the reality of, and strongly promote, cross-language transfer.

Some of these instructional strategies involve encouraging students to use translation as a tool for promoting transfer across languages. The use of bilingual in addition to monolingual (target language) dictionaries is also seen as a legitimate and useful tool within a bilingual pedagogical orientation that focuses on teaching for two-way transfer across languages. Advocacy of translation as a pedagogical tool is unusual in today’s era of communicative language teaching and it is important to emphasize at the outset that I am not suggesting a return to the stultifying world of grammar-translation instruction where the focus was on teaching grammar in isolation from communication and using translation as an end in itself. Rather the argument is that translation has a role to play within a broadly defined communicative approach as a means of enabling students to create multimedia texts that communicate in powerful and authentic ways with multiple audiences in both L1 and L2.

The roots of the two solitudes assumption lie in the direct method that became popular in the context of second and foreign language teaching more than 100 years ago and has continued to exert a strong influence on various language-teaching approaches since that time.

Yu (2001) points out that the direct method developed in opposition to the grammar-translation method during the late 1880s, mainly in France and Germany. The essence of this approach is that “[t]he direct method imitated the way that children learn their first language, emphasizing the avoidance of translation and the direct use of the foreign language as the medium of instruction in all situations” (p. 176). The primary focus is on the development of listening comprehension and speaking ability (rather than reading and writing skills) and “correct pronunciation and inductively acquired grammatical knowledge are insisted upon” (p. 176).

These principles were reflected in the audiolingual and audiovisual approaches that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and are also apparent in the implementation of communicative language teaching approaches in many contemporary contexts. Cook (2001) points out that:

Recent methods do not so much forbid the L1 as ignore its existence altogether. Communicative language teaching and task-based learning methods have no necessary relationship with the L1, yet ... the only times the L1 is mentioned is when advice is given on how to minimize its use. The main theoretical treatments of task-based learning do not, for example, have any locatable mentions of the classroom use of the L1. ... Most descriptions of methods portray the ideal classroom as having as little of the L1 as possible, essentially by omitting reference to it. (p. 404)

Cook goes on to argue for principled use of the L1 in the second or foreign language classroom based on four criteria:

- **Efficiency**: Can some content or instructional routines be communicated more effectively through L1?
- **Learning**: Will the use of L1 alongside the L2 result in better L2 learning?
- **Naturalness**: Do learners feel more comfortable about using L1 rather than L2 to discuss some functions or topics?
- **External relevance**: Will the use of L1 help learners to acquire some L2 functions or skills that they may need in the world outside the classroom.

The weighting of these four criteria must be set against the potential loss of L2 experience due to the use of L1. Cook concludes that despite the legitimacy of using the L1 under certain conditions, “it is clearly
useful to employ large quantities of the L2, everything else being equal” (p. 413).

Turnbull (2001) responded to Cook by acknowledging that while there is a place for teachers to use students’ L1 in second and foreign language teaching, there are major disadvantages when teachers rely too extensively on the L1. Specifically, when teachers who may not be highly fluent in L2 are given the “green light” to use students’ L1, then L2 use in the classroom may decline significantly on the part of both teachers and students. The differences between Cook and Turnbull are clearly a matter of emphasis but their exchange highlights the importance of establishing the empirical and theoretical basis for choice of medium of instruction in L2 teaching.

**MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

The theoretical rationale and empirical basis for teaching for cross-linguistic transfer derive from two sources: (a) the role of pre-existing knowledge as a foundation for learning (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000); and (b) the interdependence of proficiency across languages (Cummins, 1981, 2001).

*Engaging Prior Understandings*

The volume written by Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) entitled *How People Learn* synthesizes research evidence regarding how learning occurs and the optimal conditions to foster learning. A follow-up volume edited by Donovan and Bransford (2005) examines the application of these learning principles to the teaching of History, Mathematics, and Science. The relevance in the present context is that any instructional intervention that claims scientific credibility should reflect these basic principles of learning. Bransford and his colleagues emphasize three major conditions for effective learning: (a) *engaging prior understandings*, (b) *integrating factual knowledge with conceptual frameworks*, and (c) *taking active control over the learning process through metacognitive strategies*. The role of prior knowledge is particularly relevant to the issue of teaching for transfer in the education of bilingual students because if students’ prior knowledge is encoded in their L1, then their L1 is inevitably implicated in the learning of L2.

Donovan and Bransford (2005, p. 4) point out that “*new understandings are constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences*” (emphasis original). Prior knowledge, skills, beliefs, and concepts significantly influence what learners notice about their
environment, and how they organize and interpret their observations. Prior knowledge refers not just to information or skills previously acquired in a transmission-oriented instructional sequence but also to the totality of the experiences that have shaped the learner’s identity and cognitive functioning.

This principle implies that when students are being educated through a second language (either in second/foreign language instruction or in bilingual/immersion programs) instruction should explicitly attempt to activate students’ prior knowledge and build relevant background knowledge as necessary. However, monolingual instructional approaches appear at variance with this fundamental principle of learning because they regard students’ L1 (and, by implication, the knowledge encoded therein) as an impediment to the learning of L2. As a result, these approaches are unlikely to focus on activation of students’ prior knowledge. In cases where monolingual approaches do acknowledge the role of prior knowledge, they are likely to limit its expression to what students can express through their L2.

Interdependence across Languages

The interdependence hypothesis was formally expressed as follows (Cummins, 1981):

To the extent that instruction in Lx is effective in promoting proficiency in Lx, transfer of this proficiency to Ly will occur provided there is adequate exposure to Ly (either in school or environment) and adequate motivation to learn Ly.

In concrete terms, what this principle means is that in, for example, a dual language Spanish–English bilingual program in the USA, Spanish instruction that develops Spanish reading and writing skills is not just developing Spanish skills, it is also developing a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency that is strongly related to the development of literacy in the majority language (English). In other words, although the surface aspects (e.g., pronunciation, fluency, etc.) of different languages are clearly separate, there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency that is common across languages. This common underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related proficiency from one language to another.

There is extensive empirical research that supports the interdependence of literacy-related skills and knowledge across languages (see reviews by Baker, 2001; Cummins, 2001; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian, 2006). Thomas and Collier (2002), for example, found that immigrant students’ L1 proficiency at the time of their arrival in the USA is the strongest predictor of English
academic development. The research trends can also be illustrated by the findings of Verhoeven (1991) in the context of two experimental transitional bilingual programs involving Turkish-background students in the Netherlands. These programs promoted L1 literacy over several elementary school grades. Verhoeven summarized the results as follows:

With respect to linguistic measures, it was found that a strong emphasis on instruction in L1 does lead to better literacy results in L1 with no retardation of literacy results in L2. On the contrary, there was a tendency for L2 literacy results in the transitional classes to be better than in the regular submersion [Dutch-only] classes. Moreover, it was found that the transitional approach tended to develop a more positive orientation toward literacy in both L1 and L2. Finally, there was positive evidence for [the] interdependence hypothesis. From the study on biliteracy development it was found that literacy skills being developed in one language strongly predict corresponding skills in another language acquired later in time (1991a, p. 72).

Depending on the sociolinguistic situation, five types of transfer are possible:

- Transfer of conceptual elements (e.g., understanding the concept of photosynthesis);
- Transfer of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies (e.g., strategies of visualizing, use of graphic organizers, mnemonic devices, vocabulary acquisition strategies, etc.);
- Transfer of pragmatic aspects of language use (willingness to take risks in communication through L2, ability to use paralinguistic features such as gestures to aid communication, etc.);
- Transfer of specific linguistic elements (knowledge of the meaning of photo in photosynthesis);
- Transfer of phonological awareness—the knowledge that words are composed of distinct sounds.

The question sometimes arises as to whether we are talking about transfer or the existence of underlying attributes based on cognitive and personality attributes of the individual. In reality, these dimensions are not separate. The presence of the underlying attribute makes possible transfer across languages. Attributes develop through experience; in other words, they are learned. Once they exist within the individual’s cognitive apparatus or operating system (Baker, 2001), they are potentially available for two-way transfer across languages (from Lx to Ly or from Ly to Lx) if the sociolinguistic and educational context is conducive to, or supports, such transfer.
An example from a research study conducted in the greater Toronto area (Cummins et al., 2006) illustrates the instructional possibilities that emerge when bilingual students’ L1 and prior knowledge are acknowledged as important resources for learning. Several months after her arrival in Canada from Pakistan, grade 7 student, Madiha Bajwa, authored with two of her friends, Kanta Khalid and Sulmana Hanif, a bilingual Urdu–English book entitled *The New Country*. The 20-page book “describes how hard it was to leave our country and come to a new country.” Both Kanta and Sulmana had arrived in Toronto in grade 4 and were reasonably fluent in English but Madiha was in the very early stages of English acquisition.

The three girls collaborated in writing *The New Country* in their “mainstream” grade 7/8 classroom in the context of a unit on the theme of migration that integrated social studies, language, and ESL curriculum expectations. They researched and wrote the story over several weeks, sharing their experiences and language skills. Madiha’s English was minimal but her Urdu was fluent, Sulmana and Kanta were fluent and reasonably literate in both Urdu and English. In composing the story, the three girls discussed their ideas primarily in Urdu but wrote the initial draft in English with feedback and support from their teacher (Lisa Leoni). When the English draft was finalized, they translated it into Urdu.

In a “normal” classroom, Madiha’s ability to participate in a grade 7 social studies unit would have been severely limited by her minimal knowledge of English. She certainly would not have been in a position to write extensively in English about her experiences, ideas, and insights. However, when the social structure of the classroom was changed in very simple ways that permitted her to draw on her L1 concepts and literacy, Madiha was enabled to express herself in ways that few second language learners experience. Her home language, in which all her experience prior to immigration was encoded, became once again a tool for learning. She contributed her ideas and experiences to the story, participated in discussions about how to translate vocabulary and expressions from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu, and shared in the affirmation that all three students experienced with the publication of their story as a (hard copy) book and on the world wide web. The fact that instruction was conducted in English and the teacher did not know Urdu or the other home languages of students in her multilingual classroom was not an impediment to the implementation of bilingual instructional strategies.
The fusion of affective, cognitive, and linguistic processes in the creation of dual language texts is reflected in the label *identity texts* that we have used to refer to students’ bilingual writing (Cummins et al., 2005). This term describes the products of students’ creative work or performances carried out within the pedagogical space orchestrated by the classroom teacher. Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts which can be written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light. When students share identity texts with multiple audiences (peers, teachers, parents, grandparents, sister classes, the media, etc.) they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences. Although not always an essential component, technology acts as an amplifier to enhance the process of identity investment and affirmation. It facilitates the production of these texts, makes them look more accomplished, and expands the audiences and potential for affirmative feedback.

Translation is an integral part of creating dual language identity texts. Translation also plays an important role in enabling bilingual and newcomer students to participate actively in instruction. Students who engaged in creating dual language identity texts were asked how they felt about using their L1 in the classroom and the extent to which they felt L1 use might help with reading and writing in English (Bismilla, Cummins, Leoni, and Sandhu, 2006). The following written comments reflect newcomer students’ insights into both the role of prior knowledge and cross-lingual transfer in L2 learning (spelling and punctuation original):

- When I allowed to use Hebrew it helps me understand English I thinking in Hebrew and write in English. If I read in English I think in Hebrew and understand more.
- When I am allowed to use my first language in class it helps me with my writing and reading of english because if I translation in english to urdu then urdu give me help for english language. I also think better and write more in english when I use urdu because I can see in urdu what I want to say in english.
- When I am allowed to use Urdu in class it helps me because when I write in Urdu and then I look at Urdu words and English comes in my mind. So, its help me a lot. When I write in English, Urdu comes in my mind. When I read in English I say it in Urdu in my mind. When I read in Urdu I feel very comfortable because I can understand it.
Despite their still limited English, these newcomer students insightfully describe what happens inside their heads as they grapple with the learning of English. Their responses accurately reflect the quantitative research on cross-lingual interdependence. They highlight the transfer of concepts and strategies across languages and forcefully call into question the prevalence of monolingual instructional assumptions that essentially deny students access to their L1 as a resource for learning.

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Researchers have observed for many years that many students in bilingual and second language immersion programs spontaneously focus on similarities and differences in their two languages. Lambert and Tucker (1972), for example, noted that students in the French immersion program they evaluated engaged in a form of contrastive linguistics where they compared aspects of French and English despite the fact that in this program (and in virtually all Canadian French immersion programs) the two languages were kept rigidly separate. If students in bilingual/immersion programs spontaneously focus on similarities and differences in their two (or more) languages, and we believe that this increases their language awareness in positive ways, then why not systematically encourage and support them in focusing on language and relating their L1 knowledge to L2?

Teaching for transfer has not been pursued in the vast majority of bilingual/immersion programs, nor in the teaching of the dominant language to newcomer students, because of the uncritical acceptance of monolingual instructional assumptions by many policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers.

Among the bilingual strategies that can be employed to promote literacy engagement in both L1 and L2 are the following:

- **Creation of dual language multimedia books or projects.** Students write creatively in L1 and L2 and amplify these identity texts through technology (see, for example, the Dual Language Showcase [http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/](http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/) and the Multiliteracies web site [www.multiliteracies.ca](http://www.multiliteracies.ca)).

- **Sister class exchanges.** Students engage in technology-mediated sister class exchanges using L1 and L2 to create literature and art and/or to explore issues of social relevance to them and their communities (e.g., Social History of Our Community, Voices of our Elders, etc.). Students can also create movies, audio CDs, and/or multilingual web pages in collaboration with their sister classes (Cummins, Brown, and Sayers, 2007).
Many other strategies for enabling bilingual students to use both their languages as tools for learning are outlined in Coelho (2006), DeFazio (1997), Lucas and Katz (1995), and Jessner (Jessner, Multicompetence Approaches to Language Proficiency in Multilingual Education, Volume 5). Among the instructional options are the following:

- Focus on cognates in contexts where the languages share common linguistic origins. In Spanish–English and French–English bilingual programs in the USA and Canada, respectively, monolingual instructional assumptions dictate that cognate relationships are only minimally explored despite the fact that the low-frequency academic language of English derives from the same Latin and Greek roots as Spanish and French. Explicit focus on this cross-lingual strategy is required if students are to use it effectively (Nagy, Garcia, Durgunoglu, and Hancin-Bhatt, 1993).

- From kindergarten on, students bring in words (in L1, L2, or L3) to class to explore with peers and teacher and they incorporate these words into technology-supported bilingual/multilingual dictionaries (Cummins, Brown, and Sayers, 2007).

- Provide opportunities for students to develop ideas in their stronger language and then work collaboratively towards expression of these ideas in their less proficient language. For example, English learners could write initially in their L1, discuss and clarify concepts, plan group tasks, write notes and outlines, etc. Coelho (2006) points out that this L1 work “will be a preliminary step toward producing work in English, and it will ensure a better product in the end” (p. 30).

- Students in bilingual or L2 immersion programs can develop critical literacy and language awareness by examining media reports on contemporary issues and comparing the way events and controversies are reported in different languages.

In summary, if bilingual and second language immersion programs are to reach their full potential, it is important that we revisit the monolingual instructional orientation that dominates the implementation of many of these programs and in some cases has assumed the status of dogma. There is simply no research basis for either the direct method or the two solitudes assumption. Similarly, there is no research evidence that translation, used appropriately, is in any way an impediment to effective language learning. On the contrary, research suggests that translation can serve useful pedagogical purposes. Orleanna, Reynolds, Dorner, and Meza (2003), for example, highlight the relevance of Latino/a students’ translation practices and abilities for in-school literacy instruction. While extensive use of the target language within foreign/second language and bilingual/immersion programs is clearly a useful and important instructional strategy, it should not be
implemented in a rigid or exclusionary manner. As the examples in this paper illustrate, students’ L1 can be a powerful intellectual resource, and bilingual instructional strategies can usefully complement monolingual strategies to promote more cognitively engaged learning.

REFERENCES


