



## Initial Literacy Instruction in Dual Language Programs: Sequential or Simultaneous?

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The question of how to provide initial literacy instruction in dual language programs seems to be perennial. Both those school districts with newly implemented programs and those with well established programs return again and again to the question of how to best teach reading and writing to students in the early grades of a dual language program. This concern about the form that initial literacy instruction will take is well founded, since the goal of dual language programs is unique: to graduate students who are fully literate in two languages. Given that neither monolingual, general education programs nor transitional bilingual programs have biliteracy as a goal, districts with dual language programs have no established guidelines to follow when creating a plan for teaching literacy in two languages. Districts who try to impose a literacy plan developed for literacy in one language – English - quickly discover that the path toward biliteracy is qualitatively different from the path toward literacy in one language only, and requires a different model of initial literacy instruction.

When creating a biliteracy plan, dual language programs choose between simultaneous biliteracy instruction and sequential biliteracy instruction. Simultaneous biliteracy instruction refers to students receiving formal literacy instruction in two languages beginning in Kindergarten and without translation (Howard & Sugarman, 2009). This would mean that students would participate in two literacy classes daily. Sequential biliteracy instruction is defined by students learning to read and write in one language first and only beginning to receive formal literacy instruction in a second language at a later point in the program (Howard & Sugarman, 2009). If programs decide to implement sequential literacy, they need to make another decision: either to have all students learn to read and write in the minority language first (Spanish, Japanese, Polish, etc.) and later receive formal literacy instruction in English, or to have students receive initial literacy in their native language first (English speakers receive initial literacy instruction in English and minority language speakers receive initial literacy instruction in their language) and then later receive formal literacy instruction in the other language.

As programs look at making the decision about whether to implement sequential or simultaneous initial biliteracy instruction it is important to consider the populations involved in dual language programs: minority language speakers (speakers of Spanish, Japanese, Polish, etc.) and majority language speakers (speakers of English). Over thirty years of research support the theory that children dominant in a language other than English – minority language speakers - benefit from initial literacy instruction in their first language. The theory behind bilingual education is that when children are provided a solid base in content and literacy in their first - or dominant – language, they will then be able to transfer these skills to English (Cummins, 1981; Ramirez, et al, 1991, Thomas & Collier, 1998). This theory, which has instructed and informed bilingual education programs throughout the United States, has led educators to look at bilingual education as a set of either/or questions: students are dominant in either English or another language (not both); initial literacy should be taught in English or another language (not both); This theory has also led educators to believe that when students are dominant in another language (Spanish, Polish, Chinese, etc.), instruction should be conducted in that language, with English to enter only once a solid base has been established. But with the majority of English language learners being born in the United States (Swanson, 2009) and growing up in a bilingual world, it has become increasingly more difficult to look at our students as either/or.

Students that enter dual language programs as minority language speakers are oftentimes more correctly defined as two-language learners (Escamilla, 2000). These students use both their linguistic resources to interact with their bilingual environments. They enter the Kindergarten classroom and tell their teacher, “My dog *tiene manchas*.” and “*Ayer*, I was *tos-ing*.” Two-language learners have grown up using both of their linguistic resources, and have strengths in both languages. These students are exposed to English literacy on a daily basis: on television, in stores, on street signs. Given the bilingual environments of these children, sequential literacy is a fallacy. There is no real way to implement sequential literacy instruction when these two language learners have been surrounded by English literacy their whole lives. Providing two language learners with literacy instruction in one language only is looking at these students through the old, either/or paradigm. Simultaneous biliteracy instruction allows these two language learners to use all their linguistic resources and it more realistically reflects the bilingual world in which these students live.

Sequential literacy instruction for majority language speakers is also somewhat of a misnomer in dual language programs. Literacy, after all, is a tool used in the study of other subjects. Students who enter dual language programs as English-only speakers are involved in reading and writing during math, science, and social studies classes, at least some of which are taught in the minority language in dual language programs. Like their minority language peers, they are surrounded daily by literacy in their other language, and simultaneous literacy instruction reflects the reality of their school experiences. And it has been demonstrated that “...it is possible to introduce literacy in a second language quite successfully to speakers of a majority language...” (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan, 2000).

Simultaneous biliteracy instruction, though, as a path to biliteracy, is not teaching two monolingual literacy classes every day. Providing students in a dual language program with simultaneous biliteracy instruction is not providing them with two disparate, unrelated literacy classes based on teaching literacy to monolingual students. It is not adopting literacy programs, strategies or methods designed for literacy in a single language. Simultaneous biliteracy is based first on developing oracy skills in two languages; that is, developing literacy skills in two languages that match the oral language development of the students in each language. In addition, these biliteracy classes need to promote and take advantage of the transfer of concepts and skills between languages.

According to Escamilla, “Focusing on (simultaneous) **biliteracy** development shifts the debate from language of instruction to the quality of instruction.” (Escamilla, 2014). Rather than focusing on **which** language to use for literacy instruction (English or Spanish) it is more effective to focus on what **strategies** are being used to consistently build and develop language, literacy, and content, and how students are being afforded the opportunity to compare and contrast their languages. It is also critical to look at what the programmatic **structures** (daily schedules, curriculum maps, assessment schedules) that are in place to support this kind of instruction.

If simultaneous biliteracy instruction more closely matches the reality of the experiences of those that enter dual language as English speakers, those that enter as speakers of the non-English language, and those that enter the program as two language learners, it makes sense that this path to biliteracy be given more consideration when dual language programs make their decisions regarding initial literacy instruction. Implementation of the simultaneous path toward biliteracy, however, depends on a clear and thorough understanding of how literacy instruction must be differentiated and scaffolded for the wide range of students in a dual language program.

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