

One Classroom, Two Languages: Adult Bilingual Curriculum Development

How should ESOL programs use learners' first language to build their acquisition of the second?

by Kay Taggart and Sara Martinez

Over the past 10 years, in programs involving more than a dozen companies in El Paso, Texas, workplace literacy classes have focused on rudimentary English language skills that employers perceived that workers needed while working in their current jobs. However, in homogeneous bilingual communities, individuals in entry-level jobs often do not need much English to do a job well. We found that employees attended instruction either because their employer asked them to attend and they felt obligated or because they hoped to acquire English skills they could use at home with their children who were learning English in school. When curricula and instruction focused on workplace themes (which workers had said they did not feel they needed), students consistently dropped out. It was not uncommon to lose more than half of the class enrollment before the end of the course. How could we change this?

In 2001, Johns Hopkins University conducted observations, interviews, and surveys of instructors working in retraining programs for dislocated workers in El Paso. These programs serve mostly women who have been dislocated from the garment industry and others who work but need to increase their skills to advance within their places of employment. Typical students are Mexican immigrants who attended three to eight years of schooling in Mexico as children. They possess high-beginning to high-intermediate levels of literacy in Spanish and beginning to low-intermediate levels of literacy in English. Dislocated workers receive federal retraining dollars and attend school 20 to 30 hours per week for periods up to 18 months. Those involved in workplace instruction at their places of employment attend instruction four to 12 hours weekly. Instruction for both groups includes job-specific skill training, computer technology training, and related English skills development.

We observed instructors using Spanish for a variety of purposes: orally translating job-specific material written above the eighth grade level; providing oral explanations when students "appeared" confused; giving directions and instructions; and encouraging students. We also observed some instructors expecting students to engage in activities that required high-level, work-specific critical and creative thinking tasks using English only. When students struggled to report on small group work using English, one instructor remarked, "They can't even think!"

Native Language Use

Using the adult learners' native language in the workforce-training classroom is not a new concept in our community or around the nation. Beginning in the latter half of the 1970s and continuing through the mid-1990s, the US Department of Education funded a number of Bilingual Vocational Training (BVT) projects under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act. Some of these projects developed native-language instructional materials and used Spanish, Chinese, or another language to teach job-specific skills; related vocational English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) helped students learn English related to the work area. Other programs simply used bilingual assistants to provide supportive one-on-one tutorials as needed when students did not understand content provided in English (Gillespie, 1996).

Formal and informal bilingual programs continue to operate in various venues. Adult ESOL/literacy and workforce/workplace skill instructors who are themselves bilingual and work within homogeneous bilingual communities have used informal bilingual strategies in the classroom for many years. Many instructors move between the two languages with little thought as to why and when to use the native rather than the targeted language.

Written surveys indicated that instructors had difficulty determining what type of activities might best be implemented bilingually, and what type might best be implemented in English only. Students' comments reflected this confusion. It was common to hear "The instructor speaks too much English" and "The instructor doesn't speak enough English" uttered by students in the same classroom.

We hypothesized that by using Spanish and English for specific and different purposes within areas of curriculum and instruction, students could develop both English and job skills simultaneously. As we worked to design and implement effective workforce and workplace training programs for dislocated as well as incumbent workers, we sought to answer the following questions:

- If students are not able to use their native language to relate prior knowledge to classroom contexts, express ideas and opinions, and develop higher-order thinking skills relating to their targeted career field, will they fully benefit and thrive from the educational experience?
- How can we maximize learning of English and job skills by using both languages in the classroom?

Curriculum Examples

Bilingual Strategies for Contextual Curricula

Bilingual curricula and instruction do not mean direct translation of all course content. They mean using students' native language to build conceptual understanding and to process knowledge and skills, while developing interpersonal communicative competence in English. Instructors must be clear about when and how to use Spanish and English in the classroom (Baker, 1997). Our observations indicated that instructors who use too much Spanish can slow student language acquisition to a crawl; instructors who use too much English can quash the development of higher-order thinking skills. For bilingual instruction to be effective, we have found it critical that course developers, teachers, and students agree on what components should be implemented in English and what components should be implemented in Spanish for the maximum benefit of the student. Instructors and students may move between the two languages at some points. For instance, students work with their teachers to analyze the similarities and differences between the two languages. This process helps to demystify the second language.

Following the research described above, we spent six months working with a group of 12 bilingual instructors. We met weekly for three months for training and collaboration, focusing on bilingual teaching strategies for reading, writing, listening, speaking, and cooperative learning.

The curriculum developers and teachers we work with begin developing a program by pinpointing a work-relevant theme. To do so, they first collect information from company personnel or from more general information gathered about the target job. They ask the following questions and reach the following conclusions about use of first and second language in instruction (Taggart & Martinez, 2002):

- What pieces do students just need to "know" in order to carry out tasks relating to this theme? **We can teach much of this in the students' native language.**
- What will students need to read, listen to, write, and talk about in English related to those tasks? To whom will they need to speak? **We must teach the English vocabulary and language structures students need to be able to communicate in work-related contexts.**

- When students engage on the job, what critical issues may arise around this theme? **We can use the students' native language to explore these issues, and then move to English to develop any additional language skills that emerge as a result of these discussions.**

Input from business and industry is important during this phase of curriculum development and instructional planning. Individuals who perform related tasks in the workplace are invaluable in helping us determine which components to teach in English and which to teach in Spanish. Interviews, focus groups, and observations help us answer the questions posed above.

Bilingual instructional curricula and strategies are integral to our instructional programs for retraining dislocated workers, and to programs providing on-site instruction for incumbent workers seeking to move up within their work environment. The programs have multiple components; students participate in work-specific training, related vocational ESOL instruction, and computer technology training. Some also attend preparation classes to take the tests of General Educational Development (GED) in Spanish.

Challenges

Our initial inquiry revealed that instructors did not make choices about language of instruction based on any explicit criteria. Even when they are trained in concepts of bilingual education, and practical strategies for using two languages in the classroom, teachers have a tendency to fall back on prior practice. Even when teachers understand the advantages of strategic language use, it is only with continuing professional development and support have they been able to implement it effectively.

As the Hispanic population grows in the United States (Guzman, 2001), and as the need for "thinking" workers increases, adult bilingual workforce training holds great potential for helping individuals advance on multiple levels simultaneously.

About the Authors

Kay Taggart has worked in education, including community, family and workforce literacy, for nearly 20 years. She teaches, develops curricula, trains teachers, and writes grants in El Paso, Texas.

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Questions for Individual Consideration or Group Discussion

Follow up activities submitted by Patsy Vinogradov, M.A.

A. General Opinions about L1 in the Classroom

Opinions vary widely on use of L1 (students' first language) in the classroom. Some instructors create a strict 'English-only' environment for their ESOL classes, and others use the L1 frequently with students and encourage them to speak to each other in L1 as well. What is your 'gut feeling' on the subject? Rate these questions from 1-5 on the following scale and discuss with a colleague:

- 1 = strongly disagree
- 2 = disagree
- 3 = not sure/sometimes
- 4 = agree
- 5 = strongly agree

1. ESOL classes should be a haven of English use, and use of native languages should be left at the door.
2. Using L1 in the classroom takes away from learners' focus on learning English, and should be kept to a minimum.
3. Students come to hear me speak English, not their L1. Using L1 is distracting to them.
4. I find it disruptive when students use L1 among themselves during class, even if they're on-task.
5. Sometimes it's just easier and faster to say a few words in L1. It saves us time and confusion.
6. Some topics in a workplace class require students to just need to know HOW to do a task (like operate equipment or punch a timecard). It's best to explain these things in L1.
7. Some topics in a workplace class require a lot of English language use (talking to payroll department, asking a supervisor for help), and it's best to keep this instruction in English.

B. Your Use of L1 in the Classroom

The instructors in this study were reported to use L1 for a variety of purposes in the classroom (translating, explaining, giving directions/instructions, and encouraging students).

Do you speak any of your students' languages?

Do you use L1 in the classroom?

If so, for what purposes?

C. Doing the job vs. Communicating at Work

This article focuses on students in a workplace or retraining program. It states that we can distinguish and separate instruction needed to simply 'do the job' (this instruction can be done largely in L1) and English

language instruction required at their workplaces (English instruction that must be done to communicate in work contexts).

Consider your students and their workplaces or potential workplaces. Do you agree that we can, at least at times, distinguish and separate these two areas of instruction? What are some examples from your experiences?

D. Critical Issues - L1 and L2

This report gives a third category of instruction, one surrounding ‘critical issues’ that arise on the job. The authors claim that we can use L1 to explore these issues, and then move to English to develop additional language skills. From your own teaching, give an example of a critical issue related to the workplace that emerged in class.

Did you discuss this issue in L1 or English? Why this choice?

If you discussed this issue in L1, did you later use this as a basis for further English instruction, as the authors suggest? Why or why not?