Orbit (in press)

Timelines and Lifelines: Rethinking Literacy Instruction in Multilingual Classrooms

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Immigrant students who arrive in Canada speaking little or no English (henceforth bilingual/ESL students) face formidable challenges in catching up academically, particularly if they arrive after the initial grades of elementary school. By grade 4, the language of content areas such as social studies, science, and math has become increasingly complex, and students seldom hear this academic language in everyday conversations outside of school. School systems across North America have grappled with the question of how to enable bilingual/ESL students to participate academically when they don't yet have the academic language proficiency to understand instruction in the mainstream classroom. Because they are unable to carry out grade-level assignments, they are frequently seen as underachieving, despite the fact that they may be making good progress in catching up academically. We argue in this paper that given the timelines required for bilingual/ESL students to catch up to their peers in English literacy skills, instruction that builds on students' home language (L1) proficiency represents a potential lifeline that enables students to participate academically and express their intelligence and identities within the classroom.

Timelines

A number of research studies have shown that very different time periods are required for bilingual/ESL students to catch up to their peers in different dimensions of English proficiency. Specifically, it usually takes only about 1-2 years for students to become reasonably fluent in conversational English. About two years is also typically required for many students in the early grades to acquire basic decoding skills in English to a level similar to that of their English-speaking classmates (e.g. Geva, 2000; Lesaux & Siegel, 2003). However, bilingual/ESL students typically require *at least 5 years* to catch up to native English speakers in academic English (Cummins, 1981; Klesmer, 1994; Worswick, 2001).

In view of these timelines, it is not surprising that many bilingual/ESL high school students either drop out of school or fail to meet graduation requirements. For example, a multi-year longitudinal study in a Calgary high school reported an overall dropout rate for bilingual/ESL students of 74 percent (Roessingh, 2001; Watt & Roessingh, 1994). For those who entered grade 9 with minimal English, the dropout rate was more than 90 percent. Evidence of high dropout rates among bilingual/ESL students has also been found in ongoing research being carried out in British Columbia (Duffy, 2004). In Ontario, students receiving ESL services experienced a 50 percent failure rate on the 2004 Grade 10 Literacy Test. These results are not surprising in view of the time periods typically required for bilingual/ESL students to catch up academically but

they do raise the question of how many of these students will actually complete high school graduation requirements as opposed to dropping out of high school.

During the past 20 years, ESL educators have developed an array of instructional strategies to support students in acquiring both conversational and academic English (for an excellent overview see Coelho, 2003). However, ESL students typically receive most of their instruction in regular classroom contexts from teachers who have received no specific training or qualifications in strategies for supporting bilingual/ESL students. Duffy (2004) summarized the Ontario situation as follows:

> In Ontario, a survey published in September, 2003, by the parent advocacy group, People for Education, showed that 76 per cent of urban elementary schools reported having ESL students, but only 26 per cent had ESL teachers. The number of elementary schools with ESL programs has declined by 33 per cent since 1997-98 despite the fact the number of immigrants in Ontario has increased annually by an average of 13.5 per cent during the same period. (p. 2)

Recent funding increases in Ontario for both ESL and for education generally will address some aspects of the achievement gap experienced by bilingual/ESL students. However, the problem is as much structural as financial. The structure of ESL provision within school systems rests on several implicit and unquestioned assumptions that limit bilingual/ESL students' access to the curriculum.

Normalized Pedagogical Assumptions

The following four assumptions and practices have become normalized in ways that constrict bilingual/ESL students' expression of, and use of their intelligence for learning:

- Provision of ESL support is the job of the ESL teacher;
- "Literacy" refers only to English literacy;
- The cultural knowledge and L1 linguistic abilities that bilingual/ESL students bring to school have little instructional relevance;
- Culturally and linguistically diverse parents, whose English may be quite limited, do not have the language skills to contribute to their children's literacy development.

The assumption that only ESL teachers are responsible for ESL support is clearly problematic in view of the fact that even beginning bilingual/ESL students are likely to spend only one or two periods per day with the ESL teacher while the rest of the time is spent in the mainstream classroom. Few schools have articulated school-based language policies that explicitly address the role of *all* teachers in supporting bilingual/ESL students' academic development, not just in the early stages of acquisition, but throughout the entire "catch up" process.

The monolingual instructional strategies that are almost universally applied in teaching bilingual/ESL students can be questioned on two counts:

- Students' L1 proficiency at time of arrival is the strongest predictor of English

academic development (Thomas & Collier, 2002); therefore, it is clearly not irrelevant to the learning of English.

- The scientific research on learning highlights the centrality of students' pre-existing knowledge (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Donovan & Bransford, 2005). Donovan and Bransford (2005, p. 4) point out that "*new understandings are constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences"* (emphasis original). This principle implies that instruction should explicitly activate students' prior knowledge and build relevant background knowledge as necessary. Since bilingual/ESL students' prior knowledge is encoded in their L1, educators should explicitly teach for transfer of concepts and skills from L1 to English.

Working collaboratively with educators in the Greater Toronto Area as part of a Canada-wide project entitled *From Literacy to Multiliteracies: Designing Learning Environments for Knowledge Generation within the New Economy* (Early et al., 2002), we have been exploring how to engage students from diverse backgrounds in the kinds of interactions that will result in accelerated literacy development. The term *multiliteracies* was introduced by The New London Group (1996) to highlight the relevance of emerging literacies associated both with new technologies and with the multilingual composition of students in urban schools around the world (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). The principles that are emerging from this research strongly challenge the implicit instructional assumptions outlined above. In the following section we illustrate the richness of academic engagement that can result when students' L1 is viewed as a cognitive and academic resource rather than as irrelevant to learning.

L1 as Lifeline

Less than a year after her arrival in Canada, 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, illustrated with the help of a classmate, Jennifer Du, "describes how hard it was to leave our country and come to a new country." The three girls were in Lisa Leoni's grade 7/8 (mainstream) class in Michael Cranny Public School of the York Region District School Board. They are members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community who were forced to leave Pakistan because of religious discrimination. Their Mosque in Toronto is one of the largest in the western hemisphere (see www.alislam.org). Both Kanta and Sulmana had arrived in Toronto in grade 4 and were reasonably fluent in English but Madiha was in the early stages of acquisition. About 45 percent of the students in Michael Cranny Public School come from the Ahmadiyya community.

The three girls collaborated in writing *The New Country* 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 was fluent and literate in both Urdu and English. Kanta's home language was Punjabi and she had attended an English-medium school in Pakistan. Much of her Urdu acquisition had taken place since arriving in Toronto and she had become highly skilled in switching back and forth between Urdu and English. In composing the story, the three girls discussed their ideas primarily in Urdu but wrote the initial

draft in English. Sulmana participated somewhat less in the discussion but was very skilled in turning the ideas into written text. She served as scribe for both languages.

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, Madiha was enabled to express her*self* in ways that few bilingual/ESL students 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.

Madiha's expression of her intelligence, feelings, and identity was facilitated by the collaboration with bilingual peers who used both languages to construct their story. Because they were all personally invested in creating *their* story, they spent a lot of time getting it right in both languages. Their teacher (Lisa Leoni) discussed their ideas with them and provided feedback on drafts of the English version. But the three girls had total ownership of both the process and the product of their intellectual and imaginative work.

We use the term *identity texts* to describe 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.

Thornwood Public School in the Peel District School Board pioneered the process of enabling bilingual students to create dual language identity texts (Chow & Cummins, 2003; Schecter & Cummins, 2003). A large number of student-created identity texts in multiple languages can be viewed and downloaded at (http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual/). In the initial project, grades 1 and 2 students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds created stories initially in English (the language of school instruction); they illustrated these stories and then worked with various resource people (parents, older students literate in L1, some teachers who spoke a variety of students' languages) to translate these stories into their home languages. The stories and illustrations were then entered into the computer through word processing and scanning. The Dual Language Showcase website was created to enable students' bilingual stories to be shared with parents, relatives or friends in both Canada and students' countries of origin who had Internet access.

As the Thornwood Dual Language Showcase project has evolved, students at all grade levels have become involved. Students write initial drafts of stories in whichever language they choose,

usually in their stronger language. Thus, newcomer students can write in L1 and demonstrate not only their literacy skills but also their ideas, feelings and imagination to teachers and other students. The image of newcomer students, in both their own eyes and the eyes of others, changes dramatically when they are enabled to express them*selves*. Newcomer students can also read books in their L1 written by other students or that form part of the school's extensive collection of commercial dual language books. This communicates to students that their L1 talents are welcomed within the school and motivates them to write in their L1. Students can also take these books home from the classroom or school library for reading with their parents. Bilingual high school students have also become involved in helping students to compose and translate across languages. These students are gaining credit towards the 40 hours of community service required for graduation in Ontario.

Does the use of bilingual instructional strategies help students transfer their knowledge from L1 to English? The students themselves speak eloquently to this question. We asked the students in Lisa's current (2004/2005) ESL class to respond in writing to three questions:

1. When you are allowed to write stories in class using your first language or home language, how do you feel?
2. Do you enjoy reading your stories in your first/home language? Why or why not?
3. When you are allowed to use your first language in class does it help you with your writing and reading of English?

Despite their still limited English, the students insightfully described what happens inside their heads as they grapple with the learning of English. Madiha's response, written about a year after she had co-authored *The New Country,* illustrates the themes that emerged from all the students. Students' responses highlighted 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.

1). When I am allowed to write story in class using Urdu I Feel verey Confeteable and verey spashall and verey inportant. I Feel good that People See My Urdu and English story. I Feel verey confeteable because I no how to write in urdu and I no why we write Urdu because we Leran more English. I feel spashall because I don't wan't to For get My Language.

2). I Like reading Story in urdu because I Like My Language and I Like reding into My Language because It'srelley esay for me I Like to reed Urdu stories because I undstand my Language I Like Urdu Stories because some story is true.

3). When I am allowed to use urdu inclass it helps me toreed and write English. When I have to Learn new English word's I rember them Faster If I study the words in Urdu. Like this.

New words

English	UrDU	Picteur
Lungs	پھیپھڑے	
Kidneys	گُردے	
heart	دل	

Conclusion

The term "ESL student" implicitly connotes an image of a student who lacks something, in this case sufficient knowledge of English to participate academically in the mainstream classroom. The defining attribute of the student is her (or his) limited English. Peers and teachers often see only the "ESL student," not the person within, for the simple reason that students are unable to communicate who they are, what they can do, and what they hope for. Bilingual/ESL students struggle to escape from this externally-imposed identity cocoon. Their inability to fully express their intelligence and feelings over a prolonged period of time is frustrating and diminishing. As we have seen, it typically takes at least five years to catch up academically. Many students drop out of school before catching up, at least partly because they have not received the kinds of support across the curriculum that would enable them to participate fully in learning.

We have suggested in this paper that schools should rethink their implicit assumptions about how to develop literacy among bilingual/ESL students. It is time to acknowledge that students' home languages represent powerful resources for learning. Creation of bilingual identity texts represents just one example of an array of bilingual instructional strategies that explicitly aim to teach for transfer across languages (see Brown, Cummins, & Sayers [in press] for a more detailed discussion). Teaching for transfer does not require that teachers speak the languages of their students. It does require, however, that teachers and administrators be willing to examine critically the implicit assumptions underlying curricula developed for the "generic student" and think imaginatively about how bilingual/ESL students can more rapidly gain access to the curriculum.

In other words, we should be asking what image of the student is constructed by the (implicit or explicit) language or literacy policy of the school. Does the language policy construct an image of the student as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented? Does our pedagogy acknowledge and build on the cultural and linguistic capital (prior knowledge) of students and communities? To what extent are we enabling *all* students to engage cognitively and invest their identities in learning? Do our strategies for teaching literacy make students feel "very comfortable, very special, and very important" in the way that Madiha felt when given the opportunity and encouragement to write in Urdu?

The affective transformation that students experience in classrooms where the pedagogy focuses on their talents rather than on their limitations is also well expressed by Tomer, an Israeli-born grade 7 student in his first year in Canada. In Lisa Leoni's ESL class, Tomer wrote and illustrated a Hebrew-English dual language book that reflected his passion for horses. The book was scanned into the project web site (www.multiliteracies.ca) and shared with friends and relatives in Israel. In an interview about his book Tomer comments:

> about the book, my parents say it's great my book in the website and all my family I talk to on the phone [say] "We see your book it's wonderful."

For these students, the bond between identity and literacy has been established. While not a panacea, bilingual instructional strategies can play a significant role in helping to solidify that bond.

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