

German-English Bilingual Programs in Canada: Transitioning to a Dual Immersion Model?

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German-English bilingual programs in Canada are designed to provide English speaking children with the opportunity to learn German as a second language (Alberta Education, 1999). In the past, students in Bilingual Programs were typically third and fourth generation immigrants to Canada with little to no knowledge of German from the home (Wu & Bilash, 2000, p. 8). While there have always been a small number of students who speak German at home, the trend of declining immigration of German speakers to Canada has recently reversed (Statistics Canada, 2008), increasing the number of potential students who may enrol in this program to maintain and develop their home language while acquiring or improving English. Researchers (Escamilla & Hopewell, 2009; Grosjean, 2008) refer to these children as Emerging Bilinguals (EBs). The existence of EBs in the German-English classroom suggests a transition from the traditional model of the Bilingual Program as a heritage language revitalization program to one showing similarities to the Dual Immersion (DI) model in the U.S. In this paper, part of a larger case study of one German-English program in Canada, I demonstrate the extent to which this transition is taking place by examining how the numbers of EBs in the Bilingual Program have changed and the effect of this change on the type of bilingualism promoted, the language role models employed and nature of instructional adaptation that takes place as a result.

Traditions

In Western Canada (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba), the public school system offers children the opportunity to learn a non-official language (a language other than French and English) during the school day through an alternative program known as the Bilingual Program [1]. In the primary grades, instruction in the second language comprises 50% of the school day until grade six, after which it is reduced (Alberta Education, 1999). Languages in the Bilingual Program include German, Arabic, American Sign Language, Cree, Ukrainian, Mandarin, Spanish, Korean, and Punjabi; however, most programs are available solely in Western Canada's largest cities.

Whether the students in these programs speak the target language at home varies from program to program, however, in the case of the German-English Bilingual Program, students are traditionally from families with a heritage language connection to German, but who have not used German as the home language for one or two generations. Statistics Canada (2008) reports that immigration of German speakers to Canada peaked in 1961. As a result, when most programs were started, few students would have been expected to enter the program with knowledge of German from the home.

The bilingualism promoted in Bilingual Programs can be termed "one-way additive bilingualism" as it is traditionally assumed that the students entering the program have English as their home language and the goal of the Program is to provide them with the opportunity to learn German. This "one-way" orientation does not address whether students entering with German would be supported in the learning of English. Much research has been conducted in Canada to reassure parents that their children's English is in no danger when acquiring a second language (Cummins, 1998). The goal of the Program is to "add" German to the child's language repertoire, rather than "replace" or "subtract" the home language (in this case, English).

The contrast between subtractive and additive bilingualism can be found in American programs such as the Transitional Model and the Dual Immersion (DI) Model. In the Transitional Model, students are first instructed in their home language and transitioned to English, with the explicit or implicit goal being the replacement of the home language (García, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2006). While transitional support for the child's home language is better than none at all, this Transitional Model is criticized as a 'weak' form of bilingual education, especially where the transition is accomplished in two years or less and children are subsequently denied access to minority language resources (Baker, 2000, p. 129). In the DI Model, found primarily in urban centres with large Hispanophone populations[2], 50% of the students are native speakers of English and 50% have the target language of the school as their home language. The express goal of these schools is bilingualism in both languages for all students (Potowski, 2007). Dual Immersion programs are widely considered to be 'strong' forms of bilingual education, which promote long-term academic achievement for all students (Ovando, Combs, & Collier, 2006, p. 42).

The language role model for the Canadian Bilingual Program is the teacher. The children are taught by teachers that are

either monolingual speakers of the target language or present themselves as such, unless required to teach both languages (Potowski, 2007). Where no other native speakers are present, the teacher provides the only target language input for the children, occasionally providing additional language models in the form of guest speakers or parent classroom helpers.

Teachers in the German-English Bilingual Program in Western Canada are guided by the *Common Curricular Framework for Bilingual Programming in International Languages, Kindergarten to Grade 12*. Western Canada Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education (Alberta Education, 1999) [3]. The authors of the curriculum maintain that it embodies “the progression of knowledge, skills and attitudes expected of students who have had no prior exposure to the specific language upon entry into Kindergarten” (p. 13). This statement establishes that the curriculum is designed with English speakers in mind.

Guides to Implementation assist teachers in adapting their instruction for specific learners. Unfortunately, at present no German Language Arts Guide to Implementation is available. Recently, Alberta Education (2008, 2009) has published Implementation Guides for the Spanish and Ukrainian Bilingual Programs. Each guide contains a chapter for addressing the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. While the characteristics of Canadian and foreign-born ESL learners are described, no consideration is given that these students might be speakers of the target language of the program. To receive guidance on the adaptation of instruction for EBs, teachers in a German-English bilingual program would be required to consult the Implementation Guide for a different language and would still receive little guidance directly applicable to EBs [4].

Transitions

Changes in immigration and bilingual education are impacting the situation in the German-English Bilingual Program. These changes include diverse profiles of students entering the Program, a shift in the type of bilingualism promoted, the expansion of the role of language model and the resulting adaptation of instructional methods. Together these changes illustrate a transition to a program model that begins to resemble the DI Model found in the United States.

Canadian immigration statistics reveal that numbers of immigrants in certain language groups has increased. In the case of German speaking immigrants, numbers suddenly increased by 11, 000 between the 2001 and 2006 Canadian Census (Statistics Canada, 2008). Recent research (Dressler & Kupisch, 2010; Thomsen, 2009) shows that newly-arrived European German-speaking immigrants are young, highly-educated professionals, some of whom are enrolling young children into the school system. Researchers in the field of bilingual education note that some parents of young children who have knowledge of the target language from the home choose bilingual programs to maintain language proficiency and develop literacy in that language (Cho, Shin, & Krashen, 2004; Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999; Drury, 2007; Tse, 2001). If equal numbers of German speakers and English speakers are present in a German-English Bilingual Program classroom, the linguistic composition of the classroom would more closely resemble the DI model than it has in the past.

Where young children enter Bilingual Programs with knowledge of the target language from the home, one-way additive bilingualism is no longer an appropriate philosophy for these schools. These Emerging Bilinguals require a two-way additive bilingualism, where the school seeks to support and develop both languages. The DI model supports both languages of the school equally or with preference toward the minority language (Potowski, 2007). This provides for the sequential acquisition of the target language (e.g., Spanish) for half of the school population, whose home language is English, while also allowing Emerging Bilinguals to continue to develop the home language.

While the teacher remains an important language model in any language program, the presence of Emerging Bilinguals expands the available language models to include peers of the students who do not speak this language at home. The students who are learning the target language of the school as a second language have an adult and other children as language models. In turn, those other children receive language input in English from other, more proficient children as well as the teacher. Potowski (2007) observes that “the presence of native speakers of both languages theoretically provides opportunities for all students to communicate with native speaking peers” (p. 9). This is an expressed goal of the Dual Immersion Model.

While the authors of the curriculum that guides the German-English Bilingual Program maintain that “students with prior exposure to the specific language can be challenged within this *Framework*” (p. 13), no direct guidance is given to teachers as to how this can be accomplished. Previous research (Lemberger, 1997) documents that the responsibility for adaptation of instruction in bilingual programs in the U.S., such as the DI Model, usually falls to the teacher.

Keeping in mind the transitions noted by the research, this study investigates one specific German-English Bilingual Program reporting on the changes in student profiles, types of bilingualism promoted, available language models and curriculum. It addresses the question: How does the German-English Bilingual Program show evidence of transitioning to a Dual Immersion Model?

Setting, Participants and Methodology

The Bilingual Program studied is one of two programs housed in an elementary school situated in an urban centre in Western Canada [5]. The enrolment in 2009 was 250 students. Approximately half were in the Bilingual Program.

Seven teachers participated in the study. The majority of the teachers have over 15 years of teaching experience and most have over 10 years with the German-English Bilingual Program. Most are Canadian-born and trained.

This paper focuses on interviews with the teachers in this program, which are part of a larger case study. The data from interviews were transcribed and organized using NVivo 8 software.

The following research questions guide this section of the case study.

RQ 1: How many EBs do teachers report in each classroom of one German-English Bilingual Program?

RQ 2: How do teachers and administrators perceive the needs of EBs and how is instruction adapted to meet these needs?

Selected interview questions include:

How many students in your current classroom have come to the Program with prior experience in German (i.e. learned it at home or in a country where German is spoken)?

Is the curriculum you use designed to meet the education needs of these students?

What modifications do you make, if any, to address the educational needs of these students?

Results

RQ1: How many EBs do teachers report in each classroom of one German-English Bilingual Program?

In reporting the numbers of Emerging Bilinguals in their classrooms, teachers reveal that EBs constitute 10-53% of the classroom population, with the exception of the grade 5 classroom, where the teacher believed there were no children who could be considered EBs. Table 1 below summarizes these numbers.

Classroom	No. of Emerging Bilinguals	Enrolment in Class	%
Kindergarten	not available	19	n/a
Grade 1	2	20	10%
Grade 2	9	17	53%
Grade 3	6	19	32%
Grade 4	5	19	26%
Grade 5	0	not available	n/a
Grade 6	not available	not available	n/a

Table 1 Numbers of Emerging Bilinguals per Classroom

In addition, the teachers note that these numbers have stayed the same or increased from past years [6]. Jara, the grade 3 teacher, reports that "in the last five or more years we've had a lot of immigrants and they're also putting their children into the bilingual program. So we're getting more." Anna, the grade 2 teacher, notes, "right now there are quite a few. I believe nine. This is the first year that the number is so high."

RQ 2: How do teachers and administrators perceive the needs of EBs and how is the curriculum modified to meet these needs?

When asked if the curriculum they used was designed to meet the educational needs of EBs, teachers were in agreement that it was suitable considering its flexibility and the emphasis on differentiation of instruction. "Yes, there is always the option of differentiation" (Anna). Karin notes that the curriculum is "definitely designed to include everyone because you have so much flexibility".

In discussing the needs of EBs in the Bilingual classroom, one teacher articulates a philosophy of two-way additive bilingualism: "The children will learn from one another. The German children are stronger in German, the English kids make great partners for the [German] children. . . it actually works quite well to take advantage of that."

In addition, Emerging Bilinguals are seen as language models for their peers and an asset to the Bilingual Program classroom. They create an atmosphere where German is the lingua franca during German time. Karin comments that "[the English speaking children] have more native speakers [of German] around them and definitely it makes a difference." Jara notes that EBs provide a fresh, contemporary vocabulary and "a rich component of the spoken language to the class."

When asked to articulate the specific needs of these children, as they might differ from others in the classroom, Jara felt that the educational needs were "quite similar" and that "those children from Germany need to be instructed in [German grammar and spelling] just like the Canadian kids do". Henriet concurred, noting: "Basically they have to learn the printing; they have to learn the reading and those concepts, so they're at that same place." While not denying the validity of these statements as they arise from these teachers' practices, research (Escamilla, 2006; Grant & Wong, 2003) suggests that elementary school teachers interrogate their assumptions about the universality of their methods of early literacy instruction and investigate alternatives that may better serve the target language, such as early reading instruction that recognizes linguistic differences between the two languages studied.

One teacher was able to specifically recognize the unique educational needs of EBS. Anna pointed out that for some EBs, their challenges in English necessitate English as a Second Language (ESL) support [7] . She notes that in the previous year, such support was provided, but that at the time of the interview, no ESL instructional support was available. With regards to German instruction, she notes that she adapts instruction "by going deeper in my German lesson and expect[ing] other outcomes than . . . previously expected."

The efforts to adapt instruction reported by the teachers are primarily done on an individual level through the creation of program-specific resources. "I've got lots of little booklets and things that I've created or have been shared, mostly shared, that are little simple reader booklets." (Henriet) While Henriet speaks of the sharing of resources, Karin notes that some ideas have not been realized and "so every teacher sort of has done it on their own."

Conclusions

The German-English Bilingual Program studied emerges as a dynamic program wherein teachers welcome and integrate Emerging Bilinguals. The results of this study indicate that Emerging Bilinguals constitute 10-53% of the student enrolment in most classrooms of this German-English Bilingual Program. This signifies that some classrooms are already experiencing the 50:50 split of English and German speakers necessary for the Dual Immersion model. Teachers also promote additive bilingualism for all students, seeing the role of the Program as supporting and developing both German and English equally. They see students with home language knowledge of German as additional language models for their peers, just as their peers model English for them. This is the same way that students support one another in the DI model. Still, the curriculum provides little guidance for teachers, leaving them to create their own resources and adapt instruction to meet the educational needs of this diverse group of students. This challenge also exists in the DI model and suggests that if the Bilingual Program curriculum were to be improved to address the needs of Emerging Bilinguals then similar programs worldwide could benefit as well.

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Notes

[1] Ontario allows instruction in those languages during programs that run at the end of the traditional school day, and Heritage Language Schools in Quebec receive some provincial funding, but no school time for the instruction in these languages. Eastern Canadian provinces do not have legislative provision for providing instruction in non-official languages.

[2] Two-Way Immersion Directory lists 384 programs in 28 states (plus D.C.) (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2010)

[3] Each province publishes its own version of the Common Curricular Framework.

[4] Mention is made of trilingual students; however, the situation described is that of ESL students who choose to learn a third language at school, not bilinguals who student their first language and a subsequent language in school.

[5] The other program is a non-bilingual community program.

[6] Some interviews were conducted in German at the teacher's expressed preference. Any responses in German have been translated.

[7] Anna's comments regarding ESL are appropriate considering that the definition for Emerging Bilinguals in this study does not separate those who are raised with both English and German from those who might only recently have begun learning English. In my subsequent study, I have taken care to separate the former (simultaneous bilinguals) and the latter (sequential bilinguals), reserving the term EBs for the former group.