



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

By Karen Beeman & Cheryl Urow, IRC Educational Specialists



The question of how to provide initial literacy instruction in dual language programs seems to be perennial. School districts with newly implemented programs as well as those with well established programs return again and again

to the question of how to best teach reading and writing to primary level students in a dual language program. This concern about initial literacy instruction 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 in 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.

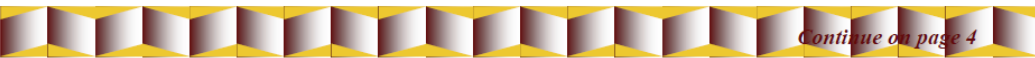
When creating a biliteracy plan, dual language programs choose between simultaneous biliteracy instruction and sequential biliteracy instruction. Simultaneous biliteracy instruction refers to students receiving formal literacy instruction in two languages beginning in Kindergarten and without translation (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 (e.g., Spanish, Japanese, Polish) and later receive formal literacy instruction in English, or to have students receive initial literacy in their native language first (i.e., English speakers receive initial literacy instruction in English while 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 initial literacy instruction either sequentially or simultaneously, it is important to consider the two populations involved in dual language programs: minority language speakers (e.g., native speakers of Spanish, Japanese, Polish) and majority language speakers (native speakers of English). Over thirty years of research supports 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 (e.g., Spanish, Polish, Chinese), 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 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*," (My dog has spots) and "Ayer, I was *tos- ing*," (Yesterday, I was coughing.) 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 only one language is looking at these students through the old, either/or paradigm. Simultaneous literacy 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. Native English 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 dominant peers, they are surrounded daily by literacy in their second language, and simultaneous literacy instruction reflects the reality of their school experiences. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that "...it is possible to introduce literacy in a second language quite successfully to speakers of a



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majority language..." (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan, 2000). Majority language speakers, too, benefit from being supported in literacy development in both their languages.

Simultaneous literacy 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 literacy 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. Rather, simultaneous literacy instruction in a dual language program is the implementation of a purposeful path towards biliteracy. A purposeful path towards biliteracy begins with developing oracy skills in each language; that is, dual language programs need to focus on developing oral language skills in each language, and then matching the literacy skills to these oracy skills. In addition, these biliteracy classes need to promote and take

advantage of the transfer of concepts and skills between languages. Time must be dedicated to literacy instruction in each language, with special care taken not to allow the use of English during literacy instruction in the non-English language. Because the United States is an English dominant society and because students are aware that English is the language of power, allowing English into literacy time allotted for the non-English language can quickly erode away at the time and prestige of the non-English language. The strategies, materials, and methods used to teach literacy in the non-English language must be authentic to that language. For example, while the names of letters are taught in English, beginning with the consonants, letter names are not as crucial in developing literacy in Spanish. Rather, the sounds of the vowels are taught first, and then these vowels are matched with consonants to make syllables. Phonics instruction in Spanish is based on syllables, while in English it is based on single letters. The graph entitled, "The Path towards Biliteracy: Accidental or Purposeful?" outlines the differences between accidental and purposeful biliteracy.

Component	The Path Towards Biliteracy: Accidental or Purposeful?	
	Accidental Biliteracy	Purposeful Biliteracy
<b>Oracy</b>	A certain level of oral language is assumed and not explicitly taught.	Oral language development is a regular part of both literacy programs, with a special focus on developing academic oracy.
<b>Time</b>	Minority language literacy is provided in limited chunks or only accidentally, integrated with content area classes	It takes up to age 8 to develop literacy. To become biliterate, students must be afforded consistent, continuous literacy instruction in the minority language, with no interference from English.
<b>Status of the language</b>	It is assumed that the minority language and English hold the same value and are taught similarly.	The status of the minority language is elevated so as to create balance between the minority language and English.
<b>Materials</b>	Materials are translated from English to the native language.	Materials are carefully selected so as to match the uniqueness and construction of the minority language.
<b>Instructional Approaches</b>	Literacy in non-English languages is taught as if the language were English (e.g. names, high-frequency words lists, spelling tests).	Literacy instruction in the minority language corresponds to the construction of that language. (For example, in Spanish, letter names and sight words are not taught).
<b>Connection between the two languages</b>	No direct bridge is provided between one language or the other. Students must figure out on their own how their two languages are similar or different.	Instructional bridges are created to help students explicitly transfer language and skills from one language to the other focusing on aspects of cross-linguistic transfer (e.g. cognates, grammatical structure, reading skills).

If simultaneous literacy instruction more closely matches the reality of the experiences of both native English speakers and native speakers of the non-English language, 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 students in a dual language program and a clear and well established plan for developing biliteracy.

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### **Planning for Bilingual**

Understand the similarities and differences between the two languages and teach this knowledge explicitly to your students

Allow students enough time to develop literacy in two languages

Plan for explicit teaching to transfer. Teach students how to bridge between the two languages

Respect the construction of the non-English language: use materials and methodologies authentic to that language



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