BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN THE UNITED STATES: REFLECTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES OF A BILINGUAL TEACHER (SPANISH-ENGLISH) IN NEW MÉXICO

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ABSTRACT

Bilingual Education Programmes in the United States are developed due to the special needs that immigrants moving to the USA have in education. In this article, I intend to point out the main characteristics and objectives of these programmes based on my experience working as a bilingual teacher at Deming High School, New Mexico (USA) for a year. I taught Bilingual Language Arts to grades 10, 11 and 12.

I will also pay attention to the main linguistic problems students had with English as a second language. I will concentrate on the main errors found in students' essays, such as, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, register and appropriacy, word order and syntax, spelling, omission of particles, and the lack of motivation as a problem affecting the whole educational system.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education in the United States started in the sixties as a request of the Hispanic population. Bilingual education programs wanted to be an answer to the necessities of immigrant workers' children. These programmes were approved by the congress in 1968 to improve the English of a minority of children. I agree with Baetens (1982: 126) in that "the very fact that a person is bilingual is usually determined by the society in which he lives, originating in such things as migration, exogamy, social mobility, job requirements, and so forth, and often the individual bilingual has had little choice in deciding his status."

Introducing these children in a foreign language implies not only learning to use grammatical rules, phonetics and vocabulary, but also learning non-verbal behaviour such as gestures. In this sense, it is important to refer to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1956), since it points out that learning a language

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implies a change in the way of thinking, and as a consequence, there are some non-verbal changes.

Up to this point it is important to offer a definition of bilingual education. The definition offered by Fishman (1976: 24) is the following: "In very general terms, bilingual education implies some use of two (or more) languages of instruction in connection with teaching courses other than language *per se*." Similarly, Hamers and Blanc (1983: 301) defined bilingual education as "tout système d'enseignement dans lequel, à un moment variable et pendant un temps et dans des proportions variables, simultanément ou consécutivement, l'instruction est donnée dans au moins deux langues, dont l'une est normalement la première langue de l' élève."

I worked as a bilingual teacher (Spanish- English) at the High School for an academic year (2000-2001) in the State of New Mexico. The subject I was teaching was Bilingual Language Arts. This article is based on my experience during that academic year.

My students were following a Bilingual Education Program (Spanish-English). This means that they were Mexican, and their families had decided that they should study in the USA so that they could get better opportunities of promotion. In this situation, students are under constant pressure to learn more than one language because of pragmatic, cultural or political reasons. Apart from this, languages compete and often generate linguistic controversies about the relevance or primacy of one language over the other (Cahnmann, 2003). It is evident that individuals can develop positive, negative or mixed attitudes towards one or more languages, in Matthiessen's words (2006: 33):

"Learning a language increasingly becomes a matter of learning through this language in a growing range of quotidian and professional contexts (thus moving closer to the condition of native speakers); and learning a language can increasingly be helped by learning about this language- not only passively by investigating it and by developing one's own resources for learning."

The state statute specifies that bilingual programmes must be established to meet the identified educational and linguistic needs of students, with a priority for students for whom language is the second language. The programme must be directed to those needs.

Following Edelsky (2006: 165), my beliefs on language and language learning in this article are the following ones:

"-Language is for making meanings, for accomplishing purposes.

- Written language is language; what is true for language in general is true for written language,
- The cuing system of language (phonology in oral, orthography in written language, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) are interactive and interdependent,
- Language has the potential for multiple interpretations because language use always occurs in a situation, […]."

2.CHARACTERISTICS OF BILINGUAL PROGRAMMES

Bilingual programmes have as a basis the respect for cultural diversity, and take into consideration the members of the different cultures' equality of rights and duties. The main objective of this kind of programmes is to make easier the apprenticeship of English; at the same time, the programme must highlight the maintenance of the mother tongue and culture, in this case Spanish, which highlights one of the main functions of education: to develop a dialogue between cultures so that communication and solidarity are developed. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that culture can be a complex issue in multilingual contexts, as Young and Sachdev (2007: 236) put it: "Notions of culture are complex, and particularly controversial when applied to language learning:"

These programmes try to avoid that the main group (American society) absorbs the minority group (Mexican immigrants) so that this last group does not lose its identity nor its language. One of the main objectives is that the main group accepts as equals the members of the minority group.

A bilingual education program must fulfil these requirements:

1. Meet the educational needs of linguistically and culturally different students in grades K12. These needs must be translated into specific program objectives, which include a well-defined English language development program and achievement in the content areas of the curriculum.

2. Use two languages as mediums of instruction for any part or the entire curriculum of the grade level within the program.

3. Use licensed teacher who have received special training in bilingual education conducted through the use of two languages.

4. Emphasize the history and cultures associated with the students' mother tongue by including these in the curriculum.

5. Operate under an approved state plan.

Bilingual education can be of three different types, following Hamers and Blanc (1983: 301): training can be given in both languages; on the other hand, training can be given in the student's maternal language until the student get the right level to receive training in the second language, in this way, the skills learned in the mother tongue will be transferred to the second language; finally, most part of the training can be given in the students' second language, which implies using the mother tongue just occasionally.

Reading and writing skills in the mother tongue must form a defined component of the program. The mother tongue is used to clarify situations in a way that students can understand messages in a clear and precise way. Another essential component for monolingual speakers of another language and partial speakers of English is the learning of a structured, sequential English as a second language (ESL).

ESL methodology in the English language arts provides bilingual students with academic needs with a progressive development of skills in understanding, speaking, reading, and writing in English. At the same time, instruction shall focus on social, cultural, economic values, and the history of the culture.

The Ministry of Education specifies that bilingual education programmes must be established to give an answer to the educational and linguistic necessities of students; the priority of the program are those students those whose second language is English. Instruction should be developed forty five minutes in the mother tongue and forty-five minutes in the foreign language (English). This implies that students' evaluation will be done in English and in the mother tongue.

It is evident that these types of educational programmes require bilingual teachers, that is, teachers who have specialized in elementary or secondary education, and who have received special training in bilingual education conducted through the use of two languages. These teachers should develop students' skills in their mother tongue. In addition, they should be conscious of the differences and similarities that exist between their mother tongue and the foreign language. Furthermore, they should get into their social, cultural and educative context, at the same time that they expose students to English. It is essential that the teacher keeps in mind that students that are part of the program not only do not speak English but also have grown up in a different culture.

The situation is sometimes complicated since some of the students are immigrants who have just arrived to the United States and have no skills in English; there are other students who have studied English before arriving to the United States. Sometimes the problem is even worst since the teacher can

find students who have little or no formal education at all. These students have an additional challenge because they have limited academic skills as the basis for learning that transfer from their primary language into their new language. I found Hispanic students with a good level of spoken English but with difficulties to read and write in this language. Some students mixed up English with their mother tongue, and had no communicative skills in both languages. The teacher's role in these situations consists in helping students to improve their mother tongue and English, so that they can be considered bilingual.

For this reason, teachers must dedicate time to study the cultures from which students come so that they can understand better some ways of behaviour. For example, the teacher's intonation may seem threatening to some students from other cultures, and some students may be used to speaking only when spoken to, showing great respect for adults.

The teacher is the model for students in the classroom, and he/she has a double role: one is to help the English language learner learn and feel comfortable in the school environment; the other is to help all students accept and understand the beauty inherent in different languages and cultures.

3. OBJECTIVES OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

These bilingual education programmes are justified since the necessities of the majority group of the population are different to those of the minority group. If these programmes did not exist, the minority group would be in disadvantage because this group does not have the English knowledge required to follow a regular program. For a bilingual education programme to be good, it must have the following components (Krashen, 1996: 4):

1. Comprehensible input in English, provided directly in the form of ESL and sheltered subject matter classes.

2. Subject matter teaching done in the first language, without translation. This indirect help provides background information that helps make the English that children read and hear more comprehensible. […]

3. Literacy development in the first language, which transfers to the second language.

The main purposes of these programmes are the following: "Theoretically speaking, bilingual education has a dual purpose: it answers the recognized need of education to be sensitive to the life experiences of the community and

it also provides children with skills they can profitably use to live in a shrinking world" (Di Pietro: 1978: 107)

Hamers and Blanc (1983: 302) consider that the main end of bilingual education is to compensate between the dominant language (the majority's language), and the dominated language (the minority's language). Bilingual education programmes allow students to learn in the mother tongue; secondly, these programmes allow the linguistic enrichment of students by introducing them in the second language; finally, they try to maintain the minority's language and culture, offering the possibility of participating in activities of the dominant group of the population.

The educational and sociolinguistic patterns in which the programme is immersed have important consequences in the program's success or failure, i.e., the programme is affected by psychological, sociological, economic, political, religious, cultural, geographical and linguistic factors from the majority and minority group, in Christie's words (2000:184): "It is in the language of the classroom that a great deal of the work will go on towards negotiating understandings, clarifying tasks, exploring sources of difficulty and assessing students' progress".

4. BILINGUAL STUDENTS' MAIN DIFFICULTIES: MY EXPERIENCE

The study reported in this paper examines a corpus of twenty essays written in English by twenty pre-university Mexican students who were part of a Bilingual Education program in USA in grade 12 during the academic year 2000-2001. Fourteen students were female and six were male**. The corpus of essays was analysed so as to identify their characteristics and possible shortcomings as comprehensible and effective pieces of writing. The twenty essays were compulsory to get a final grade; they were collected at the end of the academic year, i.e., at the end of May. All the essays had at least five of the errors that I will enumerate in this section.

In general, errors can be produced due to different reasons: "[…] interlingual errors of interference from the native language, intralingual errors within the target language, the sociolinguistic context of communication, psycholinguistic or cognitive strategies, and no doubt countless affective variables" (Brown, 2000:171). In my experience as bilingual teacher of Mexican students I have observed several problems in the second language learning:

1. Interlingual transfer, i.e., interference with the native language: we cannot forget that the phonology and the grammar of the first language

impose on the second language. As a result there are incorrect grammatical patterns, wrong vocabulary or incorrect pronunciation.

In the oral and the written language it was very common to use *Spanglish*, a phenomenon that is very much connected with mother tongue interference. Varo (1971: 109) declares the following on *Spanglish*:

> "El fenómeno llamado "Spanglish" presumiblemente se repitió en cada ciclo de inmigración no inglesa a los Estados Unidos: y así en su momento, debió haber un "italianglish", un "greekenglish", etc. Es decir, un italiano o un griego, un alemán, un polaco, etc., inficionados de anglicismos, puros instrumentos, muy precarios sí, pero casi inevitables en el ajuste de generaciones hasta la total absorción lingüística por parte del inglés."

If students lack of grammatical knowledge in their mother tongue, they normally transfer it to the foreign language.

2. Intralingual transfer (within the target language itself) or overgeneralization:

Overgeneralization means that the learner creates rules to process new language, based on the evidence. Littlewood (1984: 23) points out two reasons why sometimes our predictions are wrong:

> " a) For some reason, the rule does not apply to this particular item, even though we have allocated the item to the appropriate category. We must therefore learn *an exception[1]* to the general rule.

> b) The item belongs to a different category, which is covered by another rule. We must therefore either reallocate the item to a different category which we know, or we must construct a *new category and rule.*"[2]

In spoken discourse, sometimes students used the Spanish pronunciation to pronoun English words. That is the reason why it was common to hear students pronouncing words in English in the way there were written. This is connected with the intonation of English, which is different to the Spanish one.

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[1] Italics appear in the original.
[2] Italics appear in the original.

3. Register and appropriacy: in written language, it is very common that students do not know how to use certain words in the appropriate register. For example, they tend to forget the word 'please', that is very much used in English. It is also normal in adolescence to develop certain words that are normally used between teenagers to communicate with friends but they have to be conscious that they cannot use those words in that context.

4. Another problem related to vocabulary is false friends: students have to be aware that there are certain words that are similar in form to words in their own language but the meaning is very different, such as "library" does not mean "librería" in Spanish ("librería" means "bookshop"); "in front of" does not mean "en frente de" ("en frente de" means "opposite to"), "constipate" does not mean "constiparse" ("constiparse" means "to get a cold"), etc.

5. Sometimes the main problems in written communication are connected with word order and syntax: sometimes students tend to write following the syntactic order that they find in their mother tongue, or are not familiar with the main syntactic patterns of the English language. In fact, they have to know that English is a SVO language, but they also have to be aware of structures such as cleft sentence, existential sentence, etc., in which the order SVO has certain modifications.

6. Spelling is also a common problem when students write: they can forget to double a letter, to write a letter in a different place, to write one letter instead of another as we can see in: "apropriate" instead of "appropriate", "highligh" instead of "highlight, "analisis" instead of "analysis", etc.

7. It is also common the omission of particles, as the auxiliary in the present perfect, prepositions in phrasal verbs, or omission of -ing: "I gone to the party" instead of "I have gone to the party", "I can not give smoking" instead of "I can not give up smoking", "I look forward to hear from you" instead of "I look forward to hearing from you", etc.

8. There is another problem that can be seen as a background to all these problems: the lack of motivation. This is due to internal factors or external factors, and it is considered one of the main aspects in the teaching learning process (Harmer, 2001: 51; Martínez Lirola, 2005: 26). In fact, motivation is connected with issues of culture and society: if students come from a very low background, they might not see education as something important and with a purpose.
Motivation depends to a large extent on learners' beliefs about their coping potential. This is also related to the lack of interest in learning any

subject, especially a foreign language in which we also have to learn certain aspects related to another culture. In general, when students learn a language in order to travel or to earn money, they learn quickly because they have an instrumental reason to learn, as Ellis (1994: 514) puts it:

> "[...] learners with an instrumental reason for learning an L2 can be successful. In some 'second' as opposed to 'foreign' settings an instrumental orientation may be the most important one. Providing learners with incentives (such as money) may also aid learning by increasing the time learners spend studying, but the effects may cease as soon as the reward stops".

5.CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is essential that the teacher understands the English language learner not as one who does not speak English well, but as one who has been raised in the context of a different culture. The teacher needs to understand the student's background, recognize the learning strengths and potential available to the student through the mother tongue, and be sensitive to the similarities and differences that may exist.

The main problems I observed in the bilingual education programme under analysis are the following: one of the two languages' competence, normally the home tongue, is superior to the other, the mixture of the two languages and the creation of linguistic phenomena such as *Spanglish*. Besides, students rebel against the majority group's language and culture and show no interest for learning, etc.

A possible solution to these problems would be to help students learn that the two languages and the two cultures taking part in bilingual programmes provide them with positive elements that complement. Consequently, learning the second language will enrich the students' way of thinking and communicating. In this way, students will become balanced individuals because they will have an equivalent competence in both languages. Bilingual education also enriches students' way of thinking since they are in contact with two cultures. Given the above, we can speak of cultural pluralism, which implies a better understanding of different realities, values, ways of acting, etc.

As a fundamental conclusion I have to point out that an authentic bilingual education programme means talking of interculture because instead of the majority group of the population (the North American society) being responsible of immigrant population's integration, it is education that is emphasized because it affects to the whole society.

To summarise, intercultural education benefits all citizens because it implies learning to look at others with a different perspective, to understand how others think and feel in a way that all understand that differences always enrich.

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