

PRACTICE BRIEF

Indigenous Students and Bilingual Learning



Learning in Two Languages

Until recently, much of the research and teaching about English language learning has been focused on students becoming good English speakers rather than being good speakers in both (L1) and (L2). Education focusing on L2, typically English, risks reducing a student's development of L1. The most comprehensive study on bilingual education to date finds that an all-English approach does not produce high levels of academic English performance. Instead, having students continue to build their first language while also building their second language is the better approach.

Setting goals for high levels of bilingual proficiency in both L1 and L2 will help in achieving high learning outcomes. One of the most successful approaches to bilingual education is dual immersion, but it requires a unique context, one where approximately 50% of the students in a classroom are native speakers of one language (e.g., English) and 50% are native speakers of the other language (e.g., Chuukese). Because this is not a typical situation in the Pacific, other approaches need to be used. Successful bilingual programs in the Pacific offer a longer period of learning in the home language while students learn English. In a well-structured bilingual program like this, by middle grades, students are ready to learn in both languages across the curriculum.

It is important to note that content learning can happen in any language. It is valuable for children to learn about and make sense of ideas in their own languages. Teachers support the development of learning in both languages by helping students see the similarities and differences between the languages they are learning and learning in.

Things to Consider

- High quality bilingual learning provides opportunities for students to use all language modes (listening, speaking, reading, writing) for a wide range of purposes and to receive specific feedback about their performance.
- Learners need intensive, extended exposure to and explicit instruction in a new language if they are to learn it. It usually takes 3-5 years to develop conversational proficiency and 4-7 years to develop the language particularly used in school.
- Fostering L2 learning is best when done in authentic practices that are meaningful to children.
- When focusing on meaning and communication skills, teachers need to selectively and specifically correct students' errors without overcorrecting.
- Specific vocabulary instruction related to words in students' texts and related to instructional content is needed. Teachers should not focus on the most common words (such as "do," "have," "animal") or on the most difficult and unusual words ("flabbergasted"). Instead, they should focus on the types of vocabulary words that appear very often in content textbooks.
- Vocabulary development is critical to learning no matter which language students are learning in. Students need to develop school vocabulary in both languages.
- Teachers should work closely with parents to find ways to build L1 and L2.

Mrs. Afituk's Classroom

Mrs. Afituk, a 1st grade teacher, uses a bilingual approach in her teaching to support students' comprehension of ideas. When Mrs. Afituk starts a new lesson or unit, she introduces the learning objectives both in the children's home language (L1) and English.

Mrs. Afituk (she would use the L1 first, but for our purposes we share in English): *"This week we have been learning about how water moves or travels. Choose a partner and discuss what you know about how water travels. Write your ideas on a piece of paper, and be ready to hold your paper up for others to see when we come back together in the whole group."* She pauses for a minute and checks for understanding. She asks, "Who can tell me the instructions?" One student starts in the home language. Mrs. Afituk confirms and asks a student to restate in English. It takes the collaboration of several students to explain what they are to do in English.

Then, knowing the students understand the task, she sets them to work in pairs for a few minutes. When Mrs. Afituk brings the students together again, she reads aloud some of the answers. Then, she chooses two or three to discuss—using these examples to illustrate both the process of how water moves and students' misconceptions (if any) about that process. She asks if any student is willing to explain one of the answers. She welcomes the response in either language. Once offered, she then invites another response in the other language. When appropriate, she models the explanation in both languages herself.

Critical Reflection

What attitudes and practices around languages are reflected in your school and community? How might you change your teaching practices to improve student learning through L1 or L2?

Use of code-switching is a good example.

Maintaining Indigenous Languages

Proficiency in English is considered a necessary skill for indigenous students in most Pacific schools. This presents an important bilingual opportunity for students to learn two languages and learn in two languages. Teaching in students' first language (L1) and in English (L2), instead of instruction only in L2, promotes better learning and greater capabilities in both languages and maintains inter-generational relationships and learning of local knowledge.

To improve learning, it is important to:

- Engage students' first languages in classroom learning.
- Teach content in both the home language and English.
- Celebrate indigenous children who speak their home language.
- Plan for the use of the first language to promote learning in both languages.

Learning Two Languages in Pacific Classrooms

Effective teaching and learning in bilingual classrooms requires three primary steps: 1) teachers modeling for students in meaningful contexts, using topics or familiar experiences as content for language development; 2) guided practice between the teacher and students and among students, with an emphasis on students' having plenty of time to talk about specific aspects of the topic and about the language used for learning (revising and editing for meaning); and 3) independent practice by students, in small groups, pairs, or individually, focused on meaningful content or skills.

This way of learning through modeling and practice is similar to, if not the same as, how Pacific children learn from parents and other adults in the family in their everyday lives. Often parents and adults model for children how to do a task such as cooking or fishing; then, children spend a lot of time practicing with the parents and adults before they are expected to practice on their own. This way of teaching allows children to learn language, including the academic language of school, in ways that match home practices.

As suggested, a bilingual approach means moving between a focus on language itself and making meaning in language. Students should have opportunities to speak naturally and meaningfully, even if they make errors. The teacher in the example uses a bilingual approach to support students' comprehension of ideas. Why not try these ideas in your classroom?

