

Multilingualism Is Basic

Demographic, economic, and social realities make linguistic and cross-cultural competence essential skills for students today. Several educational models can foster multilingualism for all learners.

According to historian Carlos Cortés (1991), our ability to cope with the unprecedented explosion in religious, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political diversity will determine the future of the United States, just as the American Revolution and the Civil War challenged prior generations. There are small signs society is coming to terms with language diversity—multilingual ATM machines, fast food menus, and public service announcements. Yet others want to exclude the use of languages other than English in school and the workplace, denying the demographic realities that Americans must face in their own communities and beyond.

What role will education play in preparing our students for the challenges of diversity? If we are to live comfortably in multilingual, multicultural neighborhoods, compete successfully in the global marketplace, and take full advantage of communication technologies, basic education in the next millennium must include competence in second and even third languages. Further, intercultural understanding and cross-cultural competency are necessary to be effective in diverse local, national, and international social contexts.

Basic Education and the Global Economy

Many economists concede that the United States no longer dominates the world market. To the contrary, our economic well-being rests on the vitality of many nations. Most large U.S. companies view their growth potential in terms of their ability to attract customers worldwide. Although English often predominates in the global marketplace, multilingual individuals and communities often have an edge over their monolingual

competitors. Thus, there are powerful incentives for people to learn other languages, like Spanish or Chinese, that are important in major world economic centers. Beyond business, employment opportunities in education, the diplomatic corps, and tourism arise from knowing more than one language.

Success in business depends not only on the ability to communicate, but on astute understanding of others' views and values. Promoting competence in other languages and cultures as part of basic education is a matter of economic survival.

The global village is here. Advanced technologies have reduced most communication barriers worldwide. In addition, access to information using advanced technologies, the hallmark of post-industrial society, is critical to job security. Although emerging technologies expand communication and access to information, they do not diminish the need for language competency. To the contrary, proficiency in multiple languages permits people to take full advantage of technological advances. Multilingual people can benefit most from the Information Age.

Value-Added Education

Beyond economic concerns, there are other reasons for language-enriched education:

■ *Educational benefits.* Research in Canada and the United States shows that English-speaking students in foreign or second-language immersion programs achieve high levels of functional proficiency in other languages without detrimental effects to their English language development or academic achievement (Genesee 1987). In

language immersion programs, students and teachers use the second language as the primary medium of communication for a major portion of the curriculum, either during the elementary or high school grades. Immersion programs are effective even in communities where there are few, if any, speakers of the target language—for example, French immersion in Washington, D.C. Immersion programs are also effective for English-speaking students who may be at risk of school

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Photos courtesy of Fred Genesee

Students in the dual-language programs at the Lido School in Long Beach, New York, learn together in Spanish and English.

failure because they come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds or have low levels of academic ability. Thus, enriched language education through immersion for language-majority students is applicable for many learners and community settings.

At the same time, education must respond effectively to the needs of the growing number of ethnically and linguistically diverse students. Conventional add-on approaches are insufficient because they offer too little support and leave students in mainstream classrooms with teachers who are often ill prepared to respond effectively to the diverse learner characteristics that they present. Language-enriched programs that aim for competence in English and additional languages as part of the core curriculum provide an effective model for educating language-minority students. This is because such programs incorporate pedagogical principles that are developmentally appropriate for diverse student groups. One example is developmental bilingual programs for students who come to the United States with limited proficiency in English. Such students experience greater success with English acquisition and academics if they receive some primary

academic instruction in their home language while they learn English as a second language (Ramirez et al. 1991). Students without such support are faced with the double challenge of acquiring proficiency in both oral and written forms of a new language while they grapple with complex, new academic content.

In short, educational programs for both language-majority and language-minority students that develop their home language along with a second-language, or even a third language, are feasible and effective. These programs have the value-added benefit of developing second language and cross-cultural skills at no cost to other educational goals. These skills open employment opportunities and extend access to people, places, and information that are available only in other languages.

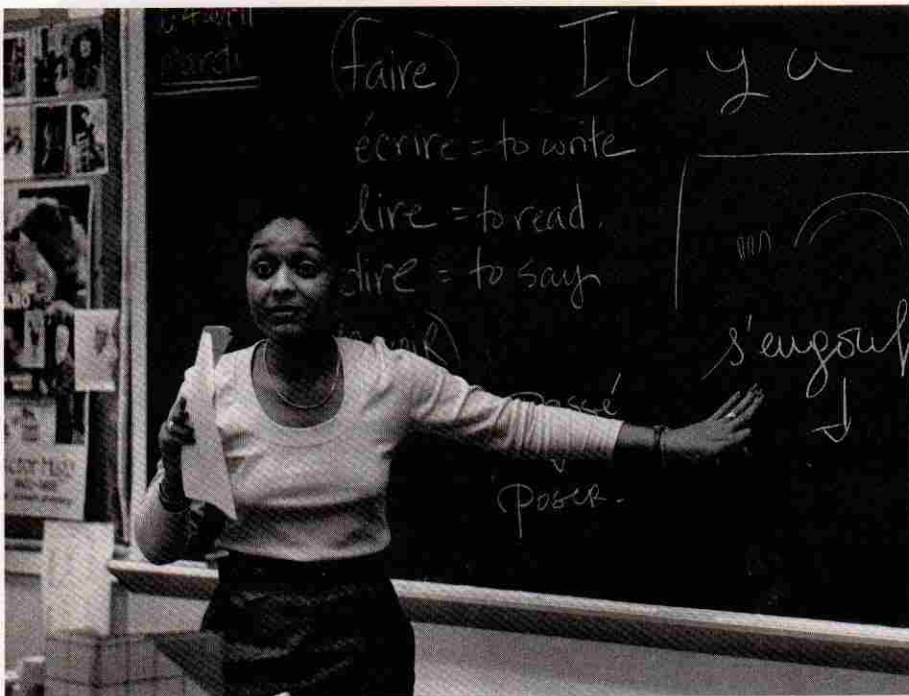
■ *Cognitive benefits.* Research in Canada shows that English-speaking students in extended French immersion programs, where virtually all instruction during the elementary grades is in French, outperform similar students in all-English schools on a variety of English-language tests. Fully proficient bilinguals have also been shown to outperform monolinguals on cognitive

tasks (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). Although the precise mechanisms that underlie these effects are not well understood, they clearly dispel the old-fashioned myth that early exposure to two languages is detrimental to linguistic and cognitive development. In contrast to this *subtractive* view, it is now clear that competence in more than one language can be an *additive* educational experience, provided students learn in supportive, language-rich environments.

■ *Sociocultural benefits.* Although English is useful for many purposes in many communities, proficiency in other languages permits people to expand their world. Such communication leads to greater intercultural understanding and tolerance. This understanding is desperately needed in our communities, where interethnic tensions heat up to dysfunctional levels. Linguistic and cultural differences can be a source of conflict and misunderstanding—or enrichment and interest. Multilingualism is a key step in understanding and appreciating differences.

Language-Enriched Basic Education

If we acknowledge that second and even third languages are a part of basic



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Education that recognizes the existing language and cultural competence of *all* U.S. students also ensures equitable educational experiences and outcomes.

education, our next questions become: What is the most effective kind of language education? Which programs provide educational, cognitive, and sociocultural benefits? Students develop advanced levels of language competence most successfully when they are engaged in meaningful and challenging communication about nonlanguage subjects. In school, this can be communication about academic subjects—a logical and effective way to create language-enriched basic education. Although teaching mathematics, science, and social studies through other languages may be new to many foreign language educators, multilingual teaching parallels commonly espoused notions in general education of a fully integrated, developmentally appropriate curriculum. Current best practice is to use all school subjects, even mathematics and science, as opportunities to expand students' language skills. This approach is sometimes called language-

across-the-curriculum or integrated language instruction.

Language development specialists now recognize that language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—evolve interdependently and progressively with intellectual development. State and federal guidelines emphasize connecting foreign language education with instruction in other academic disciplines. Certification requirements for second-language educators are beginning to include knowledge of content-based second-language teaching methodology (New York State Education Department 1992). This is precisely the approach of comprehensive basic educational programs that promote proficiency in more than one language—with high academic achievement.

During the last three decades, educators have experimented with three innovative program types that build on basic education while enriching it through

second languages. These programs serve somewhat different groups of learners, but they share common educational goals: (1) attainment of challenging, age-appropriate academic skills and knowledge, (2) advanced levels of functional proficiency in English and an additional language, and (3) understanding and appreciation of cross-cultural differences.

Second-Language Immersion for Language-Majority Students

In second-language immersion programs, native English-speaking students receive from 50 to 100 percent of their regular academic instruction through another language during part of their elementary or secondary schooling (Genesee 1987). For example, more than 900 elementary school students in the Montgomery County Unified School District in Rockville, Maryland, participate in French, Spanish, and Mandarin immersion. French immersion was introduced in 1974, Spanish immersion followed in 1977, and Mandarin immersion was begun in 1996. These programs are offered to families throughout the district as an incentive for voluntary integration. The district selects students from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. In the Mandarin immersion program, students receive 70 percent of instruction in Mandarin and 30 percent in English in kindergarten and 1st grade, and 50 percent of their instruction in each language thereafter. Program director Mimi Met emphasizes that immersion has grown in Montgomery County because of enthusiastic community support.

Developmental Bilingual Programs for Language-Minority Students

Developmental bilingual programs are intended for students who come to school proficient in a language other than English. Students initially receive core subject instruction in their native language while they learn English. Once students acquire sufficient English, English is used for most core instruc-

tion. For example, at Barrick Elementary School in Houston, 87 percent of the students are native Spanish speakers. The school encourages continuous development of Spanish while students learn English. Teachers accomplish this by teaching primary language arts and academic subjects in Spanish from prekindergarten to 3rd grade. At the same time, students learn English as a second language, with a focus on literacy skills, so they can move to an English-based curriculum.

The Long Beach City School District in New York initiated a two-way program in Spanish and English seven years ago. According to director Maritza Meyers, the district selected this program model because it gives *all* children the tools they need to participate in a global society. Meyers notes, "When you bring in a two-way program there is sharing, and everyone learns from each other." Superintendent Elliott Landon agrees: "Everything else we had seen caused kids with language problems to

the new millennium, we must take bold initiatives to put language and cross-cultural competence front and center in basic education in the United States. Education that recognizes the existing language and cultural competence of *all* U.S. students also ensures equitable educational experiences and outcomes. Education that seeks to expand *all* students' linguistic and cross-cultural competencies provides a common set of educational goals. We have educational models for reaching these goals. Now we need the vision to provide basic education that encompasses language and cultural diversity. ■

Learning through more than one language can be an additive educational experience.

To ensure that the students are integrated with native English speakers and to enhance their English-language learning, they receive instruction in art, physical education, and music in English. Instruction in English increases progressively, so that children learn 50 percent of the curriculum in Spanish and 50 percent in English in grades 4 and 5. The program has been so successful that the district continues to fund it when state and federal LEP funding are discontinued. Principal Sara Gallo says, "A measure of the success of the program is that the students acquire English without sacrificing their first language." Noelia Garza, director for Bilingual and ESL Programs, commends the programs for developing truly bilingual, biliterate students who have job opportunities not available to monolinguals.

Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Programs for All Students

Two-way bilingual immersion programs serve both language-minority and language-majority students in the same classroom. These programs incorporate the features of immersion and developmental bilingual programs, with the added advantage that each language group interacts with native-speaking peer models of the other language. Two-way programs also provide ample opportunities for cross-cultural cooperation and learning.

be segregated out of the mainstream, and that is against our mission."

The Long Beach students have direct instruction in their respective second languages and academic instruction in both languages. By 2nd grade, they use Spanish and English in equal proportions. There is so much demand from the English community that English-speaking participants must be selected by lottery. An equal number of Spanish- and English-dominant youngsters are selected to ensure a balance between the languages. District results indicate that the students score at or above grade level in all their academic subjects; they are fully proficient in two languages; and they demonstrate an uncommon level of cross-cultural understanding. Landon discusses the advantages of the program: "Two-way programs provide incredible opportunities for intellectual growth that students wouldn't have otherwise. In addition, they make themselves highly marketable—just consider the NAFTA agreement." The program continues to expand in size and scope.

Toward New Levels of Linguistic and Cultural Competence

Linguistic and cultural competence will be the mark of the well-educated citizen of the 21st century. If we are to meet the social and economic challenges of

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Fred Genesee is Director of the Division of Education at the University of California-Davis, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616 (e-mail: fhgenesee@ucdavis.edu). **Nancy Cloud** is Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Hofstra University, 243 Mason Hall, Hempstead, NY 11549 (e-mail: CATNCC@hofstra.edu).

