

Arresting attrition: The potential of elementary school programs

Kim Potowski
The University of Illinois at Chicago

In spite of having a multilingual population throughout its history, the United States has a profoundly monolingual linguistic culture (Schiffman 1996). Speakers of languages other than English are expected not only to learn English but to abandon their heritage languages in order to become “real” Americans. The U.S. public school system plays a pivotal role in this process, rarely offering programs that are truly bilingual and instead focusing exclusively on students’ English acquisition. Even rarer are programs that lead to bilingualism for monolingual English-speaking children. Both heritage speakers and monolingual Anglophone children must usually wait until their teenage years before being offered the opportunity to study a language other than English, in spite of evidence that the elementary school years are prime time for language development.

Elementary school *dual* or *two-way* immersion is a notable exception. These programs seek to develop heritage languages as well as have Anglophone children learn languages other than English. Such programs are profoundly political in their resistance of U.S. hegemonic forces through promoting multilingualism for all students. In addition, they have been shown to be highly successful regarding students’ standardized test scores and English acquisition (Lindholm-Leary 2001). But what about students’ use of and proficiency in the minority language? Few studies have attempted to quantify this aspect of dual immersion, perhaps reflecting the educational priorities of mainstream society.

A two year study at Inter-American Magnet School in Chicago, Illinois (Potowski 2007) asked how much Spanish was used by students within different school contexts, what their Spanish proficiency looked like (adapting some of the measures utilized by Canadian French immersion researchers) and whether the program contributed to children’s sense of ethnolinguistic identity. I will describe findings of students’ Spanish proficiency on a number of measures, including those studied by Montrul & Potowski (2007), as well as a glimpse at the investment (Norton 2000) of the students in identities as Spanish-speakers.

I will spend a few minutes at the end of the presentation describing a separate curricular innovation in the Chicago Public Schools (Potowski et. al. 2008) that, although less ambitious than dual immersion, also seeks to promote Spanish heritage maintenance by utilizing the spaces created by FLES (Foreign Languages in the Elementary Schools) programs to impart a K-8 heritage Spanish curriculum.

Such school-based initiatives, and research on their outcomes, seek to determine what can be done to arrest the processes of heritage language attrition and incomplete acquisition in their early stages.

References

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