

## Memories, Poems, and Songs: Successful Bilingualism in Primary School\*

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### Abstract

This study analyses the narratives of three participants obtained from semi-structured interviews about their experiences as students in a Mexican bilingual primary school in the early 1930s. The methodology used by one of their teachers, who taught them for two consecutive years, is analyzed taking as a basis the experiences of each participant.

El estudio analiza las historias de tres participantes obtenidas a través de entrevistas semi-estructuradas. Sus narrativas describen las experiencias que vivieron en los primeros años de la década de los 30's cuando eran alumnos de una primaria bilingüe mexicana. El análisis se enfoca en la metodología de uno de sus maestros quien les enseñó durante años consecutivos, basado en la experiencias de cada participante.

### Introduction

Nowadays, there are many bilingual schools all over the world, including Mexico. Their goal is to make learners successful bilinguals. A person is considered a bilingual when he is fluent and literate in two languages. Balanced bilinguals are persons that are fluent and literate in his two languages (Holzman, 1997). Also, bilinguals can be *simultaneous* or *successive*. One is considered a simultaneous bilingual if they learn the two languages together from birth. A successive bilingual learns the second language have the first language has been acquired (Whelan, Marinaccio & Pett, 2007).

There is little research conducted about bilingualism in Puebla, at least as reported by Encinas & Salazar (2007). Thus, this study aims to explore successful teaching and learning practices in a bilingual primary school in Puebla through the analysis of retrospective narratives of three students in a bilingual primary school in the early 1930s. It is worth mentioning that in the 1930s there were few primary bilingual schools in Puebla. English was then taught by native speakers there as it is now, but nowadays there are more non-native speakers of English teaching in these schools than native ones. Besides, in the 1930s, English was taught following the direct method. English teachers then were not familiar with other methods of teaching English due to the fact that they had not been proposed, as Richards & Rodgers (2001) state: "the most active period in the history of approaches and methods was from the 1950s to the 1980s" (p. 15). This study analyzes the experiences of three learners in the 1930s as well as the methodology used by their teacher. Though it does not pretend to be an exhaustive comparison between 1930s and current practice, it allows the reader to compare and reflect on them.

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\* This is a refereed article.

## Bilingual Education

Bilingual education is a system in which two languages are used. These languages can appear in the curriculum in different ways. Ramírez (as cited in Jones, 2001) suggests that when limited English proficiency students receive most of their instruction in their home language, they should not be abruptly transferred into a program that uses only English (p. 99). However, this study presents the experience of three Mexican balanced bilinguals who experienced successive bilingualism. That is, they studied in a program where they experienced full immersion in English, in spite of the fact that they had studied kindergarten only in Spanish.

## Success in foreign language learning

According to Jaatinen (2007) foreign language teaching can only be successful if the teacher not only teaches the language, but also deals with the entire human being and the group of people involved in this process. When dealing with the students as human beings, it is quite important to consider their motivation. Crookes (2003) highlights the importance of maximizing motivation through the use of adequate materials considering their appearance, content, and students' real interests. Furthermore, Prodromou (2001) argues that students succeed when they are motivated, participate in the lessons, enjoy learning, listen to their teacher; are not afraid to make mistakes and learn from them, the topics are of interest to them, and the teacher encourages and believes in them.

## **The Study**

### Subjects

The participants of this study were two female and one male subjects who were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. They were called Amy, Lia, and Ray. All of them were classmates in a bilingual primary school in Puebla in the early 1930's. At present, Amy is 89 and Lia and Ray are 87. When they finished primary and/or secondary school, they became professionals. Their English proficiency helped them to be successful professionals. Amy became a bilingual secretary, Lia, a bilingual primary teacher, and Ray, an oncologist. He studied his specialization in a hospital in New York. Amy and Lia stopped working when they got married (1946, 1954), but Ray is a doctor who still practices his profession in a hospital in Puebla.

The primary school where they studied was attached to the 'Instituto Normal Metodista para Señoritas', though this Methodist school had, in the 1930s, male and female students. The school was founded in 1881 and it was the first school in Puebla to have an English bilingual program in a primary school. Actually, it had a regular primary program in Spanish and the bilingual one where the main language was English. This school had students from different sociocultural backgrounds: some of them were very rich, others were middle class, and others were the children of market vendors from a marketplace nearby. There were far too many more students in the Spanish primary than in the English one. Due to this, the English students in primary were grouped together. The participants recalled especially the time when they were together with 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders (20 students) and they had a very special teacher for two consecutive

years (1931-1932), who will be called Miss White (it is also a pseudonym). Miss White was a middle aged American teacher who came to Mexico as a Methodist missionary and a school teacher.

### Data Collection and Analysis Methods

As mentioned earlier, the narratives of the three participants were collected through semi-structured interviews where the researcher elicited the participants' experiences when learning English in primary school. The questions guiding this interview can be seen in Appendix A. They were only used to guide the conversations. The participants spoke for about half an hour. The narratives of the interviews were obtained, transcribed, and analyzed. Common categories were identified and they were used to obtain the findings of the research.

## **Findings**

### The School

The three participants highlighted the fact that their school was the first and only bilingual primary school in English in Puebla in those days. In the words of Ray:

*It was the only school where English was taught in Puebla. Our teachers were American and they only spoke English. They were very good teachers. We learned English very well. (interview transcript)*

Bilingualism was not seen then as a highly desired goal as it is nowadays. The last decade has brought many changes to primary non-bilingual private schools that have become bilingual. However, the trend is that English will also be taught in all primary schools in Mexico including the public ones (Davies, 2009).

### Bilingual program

When describing the bilingual program, the participants mentioned that the English lessons were taught in English by female American teachers, but they also had to take subjects in Spanish with Mexican teachers for an hour daily. In the words of Amy:

*We had books for the different subjects. We studied in English grammar, spelling, history, geography and arithmetic. But we also studied Mexican history and geography in Spanish. In eighth grade we did not study arithmetic in English, but algebra in Spanish. (interview transcript)*

Different subjects are still taught in different languages in bilingual schools (Jones, 2001). On the other hand, Ray raised an issue in relation to the content of the subjects in the English program. He said that they learned too many things about the USA and very little about Mexico:

*We learned a lot about the USA, but we did not know many things about Mexico. (interview transcript).*

This issue raised by Ray is still presenting a challenge for primary teachers in Mexican bilingual schools, since these schools in Mexico have to cover two curricula simultaneously. As a result teachers of both languages have to struggle in order to cover such ambitious program. This has been reported informally to the researcher by primary teachers of bilingual schools.

## Activities

Each participant described their daily activities according to their experience. Amy said that they read every day and worked on the subjects with their textbooks. She also mentioned that she enjoyed singing every day:

*We learned a lot through the use of songs. I remember those songs, I learned them very well. Miss White taught us songs where we learned content of different subjects, such as history. I also remember when she used to read aloud 'The Christmas Carol'. All of us were 'spelled bound' listening to her ...she knew how to motivate us and she had a good control of the discipline of the group; she did not like misbehaviour, if this happened, she looked for ways to overcome this situation. (interview transcript)*

Textbooks are still now an important teaching aid used in bilingual schools, but they are not as important as in those days. Technology is now providing a considerable amount of information and resources for teachers and learners to learn English (Rossetti, 2005).

Lia mentioned that Miss White was an excellent teacher who used different techniques to teach them, such as songs, role plays, and literature:

*For example, I remember Miss White acting out when teaching us about Galileus [Galileo]...She stood at the front of the classroom and said the words that the judges were telling him and then she moved to the other side of the classrooms and acted out as if she was Galileus answering... We sang everyday at the end of the lessons and we also learned many poems. I loved the songs, I can still sing them. (interview transcript).*

Primary teachers still need to use a variety of techniques to teach children. The use of songs and literature are still considered important tools to teach English (Bastidas, 2001; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002).

Unlike Amy and Lia's experiences, Ray mentioned that he had to study very hard. This may be due to the fact that, as Amy and Lia mentioned, they had to learn vocabulary and facts as well as songs and poems in English. Ray remembers having sung in the classroom, but he said that he did not enjoy this kind of activity very much, he said:

*Miss White who stayed in the school for many years, told me to sing and I didn't like it. But some time later I recognised that learning English was very good for my professional life. We also took dictations... (interview transcript)*

Ray's anecdote highlights the relevance of taking into consideration individual differences and needs. Nowadays as in the 1930s, centering the curriculum on the learner and considering their needs is important as noted by Sayer (2001).

## Drama

At the end of the school year, Amy and Lia reported that a special play was acted out by students with lots of songs. They said that all the primary students disguised, acted, and sang. Lia mentioned that this kind of activity was more ac-

cepted by younger students than the older ones, especially because they had to disguise themselves and some of the older students did not like this. She said:

*I remember Amy disguising and acting out the following: "The woman was old and pale, in the winter day... It's somebody's mother, you know". Those activities were memorable. I will never forget them. (interview transcript).*

Although role play and drama linked to literature are suitable activities to teach children (Ellis & Brewster, 1991), when growing older they tend to reject this type of activity.

## **Discussion**

### The School

When participants entered primary school, they did not know they were going to participate in a program where they were going to experience immersion in English. Their teachers were using the Direct Method by demonstrating and acting without translating (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Besides, the three participants mentioned that this was an innovative program. Taking Markee's (2001) terms to describe an innovation, the American teachers were the *implementers* and the students were the *clients*.

### Bilingual Program

Even though the students who entered that primary school had not learned any English before, they entered a program where English was spoken all the time in most of the subjects, due to the fact that they were taught in English. Ramírez (as cited in Jones, 2001) suggests that it is better to do this immersion gradually in bilingual programs (p. 99). However, none of the participants reported having problems understanding the English subjects in first grade.

### Textbooks Activities

Participants reported having done activities with the use of textbooks. Those materials were probably chosen because of their content, but the textbooks in some subjects just presented content related to the target country/culture and did not consider the learner's culture as suggested by Hedge (2000). Actually, it was Ray, the participant, who raised this issue.

### Songs

Medina (2000) points out that songs can be used to enhance language acquisition. In this case participants reported not only having learned/acquired English through song, but also having learned content, such as history or geography. It is important to mention that two of the participants enjoyed singing songs, but the other participant did not like it. This is where the term *individualization* becomes important. That is, it is advisable to focus on the learner as an individual, as suggested by Sarwar (2001). When teaching English, it is always important to be aware of the fact that there are individual differences and individual needs.

### Literature: Storytelling, Poems and Drama

#### *1. Storytelling*

Ellis & Brewster (1991) point out that "storybooks can provide an ideal introduction to the foreign language presented in a context that is familiar to the child" (p.1). They go on stating that stories are motivating and fun, they exercise the imagination, they are a useful tool to link fantasy with the real world, and listening to stories in a class is a shared social experience. Besides, they can be used to teach the four language skills (Tapia, 2002).

## 2. Poems

Miss White integrated language and literature as suggested by Collie & Slater (1987). Students were asked to learn poems and some of them not only integrated language but content subject as Amy pointed out. Collie and Slater mention that "many poems are well-suited to a single classroom lesson" (p. 226).

## 3. Drama

Drama was used both by the teacher and by the students. The teacher used drama to illustrate different teaching points related to content courses, as mentioned by Lia. But students also participated by acting out plays at the end of each school year. They sang and acted. They wore special clothes. As Collie and Slater (1987) mention "with groups that respond well to drama activities, putting on one scene, or a short play, can be both enjoyable and rewarding" (p. 163). It seems that drama was a useful tool to teach the language to children, and some of them found it enjoyable and rewarding.

## Dictation

Dictation is a simple teaching technique that can provide much needed structure and reinforcement for language learners. It can also be used to quiet a restless class or to pull together a distracted one as pointed out by Nelson (1998). Miss White also used this technique in her lessons.

## **Conclusions**

To sum up, from these narratives it can be inferred that Miss White was a competent teacher as defined by Randall & Thornton (2001). She had strategies to cope with common classroom events, she was able to improvise, plan, and make conscious decisions about her own actions based on the context. She integrated the four language skills communicatively and she used experiential learning as suggested by Kang (2007). She was an American EFL teacher teaching in Mexico in the 1930s. Thus, she followed, at times, traditional methods such as rote learning for poems, but she combined these techniques with motivating ones, such as storytelling and drama, becoming a multiple actor to help learners understand content and the language without translation; therefore, she was using the Direct Method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). According to Amy and Lia, Miss White was a teacher that enjoyed her job and made a difference in students' lives. She created a learning atmosphere where meaningful learning occurred (Díaz-Barriga & Hernández, 2002). The three participants reported having mastered the four language skills in English and they can still use this language to communicate effectively, that is, they are successful bilinguals. It is worth mentioning that they used the language in their professions and they can still use it now. I think we can learn from their teacher from her enthusiasm, variety of ma-

terials and techniques, and her love for her profession. Furthermore, as suggested by Cameron (2002) we belong to a modern society and according to her, we need to construct our own story. Thus, it is our turn to be those professional teachers that use a variety of techniques, motivate our students, and help them learn English; and by doing so, making a difference in our students' lives, as Miss White did on the participants of this study.

Further research is needed about English teaching in bilingual primary schools. It would be worth exploring teaching practices in those settings to analyse them and learn from this analysis.

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### Appendix A: Interview guide

1. Can you describe your experiences learning English at primary school?
2. What activities did the teachers do to teach you English?
3. What was the purpose, length and frequency of these activities?
4. Did you like them? Why?
5. Anything you would like to add.