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Bilingual Education and Technology

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Background

Technology can be an intimidating word to many people regardless of its use and context. To lessen the intimidation a specific definition of technology is needed.

Technology is not just working with a computer. Specifically in the classroom and school setting technology can be expanded to video and audio tapes, televisions, film strip projectors, overhead projectors, slates, fountain pens, pencils, chalk, typewriters, fax machines and crayons. (Lee, 2000). Assuming many of these items are regularly seen in classrooms, the idea of integrating technology is ever more important. As technology and its improvements continue, teachers are expected to use, and in some cases may end up abusing technology. Taking a class to the computer lab to have a “free choice” day, where students play games and search on the web, is not enough. Students should be using technology as a means to become connected to the curriculum. To take the words from Alma Flor, a bilingual educator trying to integrate technology into her classroom, “technology is indeed a new form of literacy. If our children are not well educated technologically, they will not have an opportunity to have equal access.” This opinion and stance also comes from David Ramirez, a bilingual educator and a product of a bilingual ESL program, “drawing from my wide range of experiences, I ask myself: 'Why is it there are certain segments of our population that seem to be overly challenged?' And I start looking at issues of equity and access to all kinds of resources, and whether kids and families have what we used to talk about as 'equal opportunities to learn.'" (Klerk, 2000). This idea of providing equal opportunities to learn is indeed something we as educators strive for in our classrooms, regardless of

the influence of technology or not. However, we do know how difficult this task can become and are constantly searching for an “easier” way to bridge this equality gap.

Technology then, can not be just working with a computer. The ideals and methods surrounding technology surely have become increasingly more in depth and continue to change in the blink of an educated eye. This rapid growth and push on the importance of technology has been centered in this country. Unfortunately when thinking and observing bilingual education, the first thought regarding technology is that not everyone in this country cannot have the same access to technology and therefore may become viewed as an “outsider” if they don’t have a computer at home, or if they can’t understand simple processes on a computer because they lack the practice from the home. In fact, the 1993 Census Bureau statistics show that only 13 percent of black youth and 12.1 percent of Latino youth ages 3 to 17 (up from 10.6 percent and 9.6 percent in 1989) have access to a computer, compared to the 35.8 percent of white youth. The numbers go up by 0.8 percentage points for African-Americans and Latinos over the age of 18, but the gap is still prominent (Zipp, 1997). This begins to demonstrate where a frustration level with students can exist and can carry over throughout many years of schooling if as educators we do not step in to help. Students recognize differences and therefore focus on what makes them “better” than their friends. Those students not “better” than their peers or even those students not “equal” to their peers are again viewed as that “outsider.”

The idea of being viewed as an “outsider” is also something commonly experienced by students in a bilingual education program. Students may feel left out of a classroom because they cannot perform as other students in their class. They may

also experience frustration due to the lack of language and background. Bringing technology to these students may actually help develop the language and initialize some needed forms of communication. The idea of primary language use and secondary language use becomes the issue and it is up to the teacher and the child to agree on what programs may be needed and used efficiently.

The frustration felt by the students not being able to understand technology and by students not understanding the secondary or “main” language used in a classroom is comparable in many details. Students ultimately are made to feel inferior and can give up and walk away from their work and the school setting. Teachers will struggle to keep students involved as they continue to build differentiated curriculum. The main difference between these two “frustrations” is that bilingual students are expected to learn English in order to be successful in our schools and society. Though technology is viewed as an important aspect of our culture, one can, and usually does survive without conforming to technological advances. The “outsider” view remains in both instances however, and can ultimately run a student or adult down and force isolation in regards to conforming to society. The job of the educator is to then find ways to bridge these gaps in technology and language use and continue to educate the children of our society in the best known capacity.

It is then the goal of this paper to discuss the many new and used bilingual technology programs used in the classroom to improve language proficiency and technological competency for our students. The programs described should be viewed as helpful tools and concepts but as with anything should not be viewed as the “end all, be all” to using technology in a bilingual setting. As with anything, it is up to the teacher

to use what is needed and best for the students in his or her classroom. These ideas and programs are also not every program out there, and should be seen as a wide range of common used practices.

Programs

Communication

The first part of technology in a classroom is getting students involved and willing to “touch” the technology. Technology can be a scary thing and just making a child aware of what is out there is very much a needed portion of instruction. The other aspect of beginning technology in a bilingual program is the idea of communication. The world today communicates via the internet with email, instant messaging, and in some cases video conferencing. Students need to understand that all of these forms of communication are acceptable and can be a valid way to become an aspect and part of society.

Many internet companies in recent months have tried to show that technology has no prejudices or race. For example the internet and phone company, MCI, began a commercial with the quote "There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, Internet." According to a special report regarding the “net” having no color, Sandy Zipp (1997) speaks out about this recent ad. She feels that “this recent MCI commercial articulates a ubiquitous conceit about interactive electronic technology. But the long-distance company's vision of an online paradise doesn't begin to address the complex issues emerging around race and the Net.”

Indeed the idea of race and prejudice are seen as factors in communication regardless of the use of the internet. The young people at Pacific News Service's Youth Outlook (YO) have begun to utilize communication on the internet to discuss race and issues surrounding bilingual education. "These programs - a Web version of a bimonthly newspaper distributed in schools and youth centers, and a teen chat room, respectively - are staffed by diverse teams of teenagers and young adults from the first American generation to come of age with these new technologies." (Zipp, 1997).

The "Plug-In" program from the YO service is used as a means to discuss and organize regarding the students generation and background. The students monitor a chat room organized regarding students' feelings and needs to discuss racial and bilingual issues. The outcome of this program is amazing, the students and staff are ultimately learning from each other and using the opinions expressed as a way to "step on" racial issues, beliefs and prejudgments. For example:

"Plug In's Cynthia Dwyer, 13, remembers that during a recent chat dealing with Ebonics, someone called black Ebonics supporters "lazy," and "a lot of people typed in 'Hey, I'm African American'" and protested the attack. During a chat Rasheed hosted on sexual harassment, one girl offered the observation that, "at my school it's always those black guy thugs who are sexually harassing." After some back and forth, Rasheed thinks she learned that "not all black people are like that." (Zipp, 1997).

This program clearly does what is needed in bilingual education and in the school systems of today. It allows students to talk about issues they may be having regarding prejudgments, and allows the communication to take place in a safe and secure setting. In many ways the students are willing to share more than they would if the teacher would say "okay, let's talk about problems we are having in our classroom." The other benefit of this program is that it is allowing students to use whatever language they are

comfortable with. There are chat monitors and leaders from many different languages involved with YO, and if a language is not used or mastered by someone in the program, they will work to find someone to help. Also as a tool in the classroom, a teacher may explain that this is a safe place to use the acquired language. No one will pick on you or evaluate you based on your language proficiency. Unfortunately, this program is available in a school setting only, but if students desire a place to communicate at home or wherever the internet is available, there are email possibilities.

Overall, this program provides the needed introduction to technology, by getting students to see the communication value. It also introduces technology without the “easy” way of just playing computer games. Bottom line, it provides a meaningful structured place for students to “get out” their feelings and beliefs about racism, segregation, and bilingualism.

Translation

Another program that can be utilized by teachers, parents, and students in a bilingual education program is the process of translation. Finding a way to speak to parents and students in their primary language can be a difficult task for many teachers. The first focus of translation should be that of the textbooks and the supplemental materials. An article entitled “Technology Trends and Their Use in Bilingual Education” from the September 2000 issue of the National Clearing House for Bilingual Education, focuses on the idea of educational technology using textbooks. In the article, teachers are challenged to ask and confront textbook editors and publishing companies regarding translation and supplements to the textbooks used within the classroom. The questions to be asked when looking at translated material are, indeed good questions

and should be asked if a desire to target all students equally is a focus. For example: “Is it correlated to their textbook? Is it more than just a nod in the technology direction? How much more content and interactivity does it actually add? Definitely check out whether it is just a workbook in electronic form.” (Bishop)

It is important also to stress that some educational software companies have been developing their elementary school programs in two languages; many formerly English-only software companies now realize that there is a market “out there” for Spanish language versions of their products. They also understand that Spanish is not the only primary language of many students in the schools and are therefore trying to meet those needs as well. Unfortunately when working with translating textbooks, many publishing companies have hired foreign companies to translate word for word. In many instances the texts are finalized, have no correlation to the curriculum, and often do not even make sense when read by the English Language Learner. Ultimately even the “good” translations are so pricey due to the charge of the foreign translators, the publishing company and the cost for the rights obtained to reprint the translations, that most school districts are not able to afford the needed materials.

There are a few publishing companies however that can be utilized in a helpful and cost effective manner. Below are the descriptions of the three main effective companies. These companies have been endorsed by the National Clearing House for Bilingual Education and are backed by many bilingual teachers and staff members.

- Gessler/QGroup-USA, which has a full line of early childhood multiple media programs (CD-ROM, video, audio, books, games) designed around teaching language arts. Their products come in English, Spanish, French, and German

and often offer the option of a bilingual "help" button that is perfect for the dual-language classroom.

- Soleil Software, Inc. makes a series of CDs that combine English, Spanish and French (Japanese and German are sometimes available by special request). These also have a focus on social studies, science and math content for pre-K through middle school. This company's products tend to include a "written response" section that requires students to write their thoughts and conclusions as they complete activities.
- Edmark (now part of IBM) makes two versions of their early childhood programs (English and Spanish) at the same cost. Beware of the speed at which the Spanish language is produced, though, as they tried to pack in all those words into the same space an English phrase would take. However, the basic software content is excellent.

The understanding with these programs for translation is that they are not the only "good" ones out there, but that it is important to search and develop a list of acceptable and reputable companies for use in the classroom. I found that simply going on the internet to translate a letter home or a simple phrase, often requires rethinking of what I am trying to communicate, otherwise the message makes no sense. This is the main focus on translation, being able to communicate with parents and students regardless of their language use.

Audio-visual conferencing

The next and final program in which technology is used to benefit the bilingual programs in a school is a program in which students with high fluency and accuracy can achieve a balance regarding the use of technology. This is achieved through the idea of complexity. While the previous two programs allowed students to focus on their primary language, this program requires students to discuss and learn outside that primary language "comfort zone." It is a program centered on audio-visual conferencing and classroom work. This again focuses on the communication aspect, which is of utmost

importance to bilingualism, but on a level much more centered on content and curriculum based instruction.

A task-cycling approach using computer-mediated audio-conferencing (A-C) tools was recently introduced to Italian and Spanish students at Griffith University. The overriding goal was to provide the means for students to practice speaking in the target language outside scheduled class time and, most importantly, to develop their confidence to continue independently, as part of their ongoing learning after completion of formal studies (Levy & Kennedy, 2004).

Not only were the students expected to discuss and converse with one another on a social level, but they were to develop and complete a project together. In the project the students were to pick a topic of their choice, find publications, and ultimately discuss it and make it applicable for use on the Italian web sites. The idea of the project was to influence the students to use the audio-visual equipment to discuss and prepare for the tasks the project warranted. The overall idea was that the students focused on fluency, negotiation and simply “getting the message across” in regards to the communication with one another. The students were speaking across the world with one another and ultimately used their language acquisition as a means to make this work.

Though I am not stating we need to include audio-visual conferencing in every aspect of the curriculum and in the same regard in every school system, I am suggesting that allowing students a chance to use their secondary language at a level much more detailed than simply “talking” seems to be something of great interest for the students as well as their improvement with the language. It is important that the students can communicate at an appropriate level. When using the chat program from YO, the students could type, and retype what they were trying to say prior to sending.

Thus the students, who may not have been as comfortable with the language, could still communicate at their level. In the audio-visual conferencing, students don't have the time to rethink or retype what they may be saying. They are required to discuss in their secondary language and at a level that required language fluency in order to discuss the concepts fully.

Conclusion

According to the three language and technology programs described previously, language fluency and acquisition requires a lot of time and preparation. The exciting thing is that with the onset of many new programs and technologies such as chat rooms, translation sites, and conferencing programs, the combining of technology in a bilingual program is evident. The problem still exists however, regarding the attainment of such programs in many schools. Again the idea of "equal opportunities" does not suggest money or funds available.

According to David Ramirez, a bilingual educator, "we need to establish the idea that technology is not just for the corporate world" (Zipp, 1997). The understanding that technology is growing as fast and as much as the bilingual aspect of our school systems, seems to give light on the things to come. It is important to establish an understanding that even though not everyone in the world has the same opportunities, schools and educators should do the most work in bridging the gap. This is tough however when technology and bilingualism "fight" against one another. In David Ramirez's last comment in his interview with Zipp, he states an ironic aspect to technology and its suggested "move toward" bilingualism.

It might be interesting to end with an amusing and possibly symbolic example of linkages between bilingual education and technology. People who use Microsoft Word97 for their word processing will probably have noticed that the spell checker does not recognize the words "bilingualism," "multilingualism," or "transformative." Microsoft does, however, recognize the word "monopoly." (Zipp, 1997).

Bilingualism and technology are two ideas seemingly new to the education system. If as educators we hope to provide the best and most accurate information for all our students we need to be willing to utilize and become educated ourselves on what is out there. The "outsider" view that many people are labeled with regarding bilingualism and the lack knowledge surrounding technology needs to be transformed to the "insider" and as educators we can surely allow and influence this transformation.

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