Final Report

Motivation for the Report

My dissertation research considered the impact of strict separation of the instructional languages in two-way immersion (TWI) classrooms, with a focus on how this practice shapes students’ opportunities for learning and their emerging bilingual identities. There is ongoing debate within the field of bilingual education concerning the extent to which the two instructional languages should be kept separate in the classroom. Much of the existing research addressing the use of the L1 (home language) in TWI classrooms has focused on the relationship between classroom language practices and student language use (e.g., Fitts, 2006; Gort & Sembiante, 2015; Potowski, 2004, 2007). However, scholars have not adequately considered the perspectives of young learners in relation to this debate, despite over two decades of research showing that student valuation of classroom language practices in relation to their own identities significantly impacts learning outcomes (Hawkins, 2005; Norton, 2013; Norton-Pierce, 1995). As the demand for TWI continues to drive the rapid growth of these programs around the country (Wilson, 2011), it is vital that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners gain a better understanding of the interrelation among language practices, ideologies, and identities in order to design more effective—and equitable—bilingual learning spaces.

In my yearlong ethnographic case study of a second-grade TWI classroom that endorsed language separation, I considered how classroom language practices impacted students’ ideologies about bilingualism and bilingual learning and their emerging social, academic, and linguistic identities. Findings from the study reveal that scholars on both sides of the debate need to better account for the complex interrelationship among language practices, identities, and ideologies in ways that privilege the sense-making of young learners. The research questions framing this study considered: (1) how classroom languaging practices shaped opportunities for learning and who students could become, (2) how students and their teacher made sense of bilingualism and bilingual learning, and (3) what happened when an intentional space for dynamic bilingual languaging was created in the classroom.
Research Methodology

Drawing upon a critical discourse analytic perspective that looks across speech events (Wortham & Reyes, 2015), I explored how students and their teacher were discursively making sense of bilingualism and their own (bilingual) identities within a classroom that endorsed language separation. I used Lemke’s (2000) ecosocial model as a conceptual framework to look across and within processes occurring at multiple timescales, illuminating how moment-to-moment interactions lead to the formation of particular ideologies and identities and how ideologies and identities from larger spatiotemporal scales shape what occurs in moment-to-moment interactions (Wortham, 2012). Thus, while the case was ‘bounded’ at the classroom level, I also considered how ideologies and sociopolitical realities at multiple scales shaped how language and bilingualism were understood in the context of this research.

The study was designed in three phases. In the first phase (June-August 2016), I examined local discourses and policies around bilingualism in this school and district to develop a deeper understanding of the ideological context of the TWI classroom in which my research would be conducted. Findings from this phase have been published in the recent TIRF Routledge edited volume on language education policies (see Hamman, 2018b). In the second phase (September-December 2016), I documented everyday languaging practices in the classroom with the goal of understanding how language separation shaped students’ opportunities for learning and experiences of the two-way bilingual space. During the final phase (January-June 2017), I collaborated with the teacher to design and implement a collaborative bilingual identity text project (Cummins, 2001, 2006), in which the two instructional languages were intentionally brought together to create a bilingual book. This phase considered the impact of creating a flexible language space in the TWI classroom.

Summary of Findings

There were three major findings from the dissertation:

1. *Language separation in TWI impacts students’ ideological sense-making.*

   One of the central findings from the study is that students in the focal classroom were developing *identities of promise* amidst *ideologies of difference*. Meaning, students were developing asset-based understandings of bilingualism and their emerging bilingual identities, but this sense-making was occurring alongside problematic binaries (e.g., English/Spanish, English-speaker/Spanish-speaker). Most students in the classroom assumed a bilingual identity: when asked “Are you bilingual?” 90% of students responded affirmatively, and when asked “Who (else) in your class is bilingual?” 75% of students responded “everyone” (Student Interviews, 5/5/17). However, students also tended to define bilingualism as separate competencies, ignoring the dynamic reality of bilingualism, and emphasized the native speaker as the ideal language user. This finding reveals that language separation not only impacts language use and learning, but also can have serious implications for how students come to understand themselves and others in TWI classrooms.

2. *A ‘middle ground’ perspective on the language separation debate is needed.*
Findings from the study point to the need for both ‘focused’ (separate) and ‘flexible’ (dynamic) language learning spaces in TWI. Language separation seemed to have some advantages and was, at least in part, responsible for students engaging in Spanish throughout most of the school day. Four pedagogical practices that contributed to the Spanish-dominant space were identified: managing students’ language use through rules and incentives, affirming students as capable (language) learners, scaffolding student learning to make the target language accessible, and connecting to students on a personal level. At the same time, language separation also limited students from drawing upon their full communicative repertoire (Rymes, 2010) for learning and contributed to some problematic positioning in the classroom. Thus, this study provides empirical support for a ‘middle ground’ approach to the language separation debate.

3. *Identity text pedagogies in TWI have the potential to support student learning and transform understandings of bilingualism.*

Findings from the final phase of research revealed that the collaborative bilingual identity text project promoted cross-linguistic transfer and opened up spaces for students to negotiate meaning and identity. The project also fostered a dramatic shift in how the teacher understood bilingualism and bilingual learning, from a monoglossic approach (instructional languages must be separated) to a heteroglossic approach (instructional languages can be used together to support learning) (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Teacher’s Shift in Sense-making around Language Use in TWI**

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<tr>
<th>Pre-Project Interview</th>
<th>Post-Project Interview</th>
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<td><strong>MC:</strong> [In the early grades] we are really working, like, “Use your Spanish.” “Oh, this is English time. This is Spanish time.” But when they move onto the third [grade], I think with all the testing...the teachers have just given up time. So they just let them...the teachers say, “They’re bilingual.” But they’re not using the languages equally. (interview 1/11/17)</td>
<td>Before I was all for separation of languages...This is how I’ve been working and surviving...[but] why? Why are we separating? And after what I saw this past year [with the bilingual book project], it’s just like, this is how it is, this is how it’s supposed to be. You know, honoring and using, thinking, talking, writing. Because we are bilingual. (interview 6/29/17)</td>
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<td><strong>MC:</strong> If we allowed our students to, you know, use the other language when it’s supposed to be in Spanish, or in English, either way, if we allow them to break the rule, then they’re not truly immersed. (interview 1/11/17)</td>
<td><strong>LH:</strong> What makes for a successful bilingual classroom? <strong>MC:</strong> Well, now that I had the experience [of the bilingual book project], I think honoring bilingualism in the classroom, and that we have strengths in both languages. And it’s okay to support one language with the other. (interview 6/29/17)</td>
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Implications

These findings make important contributions to the field of language education and to the area of plurilingualism in educational contexts, in particular. First, this study complicates the language separation debate by demonstrating that there are both advantages and disadvantages in enforcing strict language separation; a ‘middle ground’ approach seems to be needed. Second, by demonstrating that students are active sense-makers of their language learning experiences, this study reveals the importance of engaging with student perspectives when making decisions about language allocation in the classroom. Third, this study offers one technique for fostering plurilingualism in the classroom, demonstrating how the intentional design of flexible language spaces can support student learning, while also acknowledging the importance of maintaining some ‘protected’ spaces for the minoritized language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017) in the classroom.

There are several implications from this study for policymakers and practitioners. For policymakers, findings from this research provide evidence that language separation should not be promoted as the ‘gold standard’ of TWI programs; rather, a mixed approach that incorporates both ‘focused’ and ‘flexible’ language spaces is needed. For educators, this study demonstrates the importance of talking with young students about their bilingual learning experiences, not assuming that students are passive language learners or that language learning is a neutral activity. This study also provides evidence of a pedagogy that can foster these conversations—collaborative bilingual identity texts—which not only open up spaces for discussing the nature of bilingualism and bilingual learning but also promote cross-linguistic transfer and metalinguistic understandings. Together, policymakers and educators can reenvision the TWI classroom as a dynamic languaging environment that incorporates focused and flexible language spaces, engages with student sense-making, and promotes plurilingualism in our schools and our society.
References


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