The Synergy of Theory, Practice, and Language

José Medina *and* ***Luis Javier Pentón Herrera*** *stress the importance of teacher training specifically designed for K-8 dual language (Spanish-English) immersion programs*

The restoration of bilingual education practices in the U.S. is often regarded as starting in 1963 in Florida. "In 1963, Cuban exiles established a dual-language (DL) school (Coral Way Elementary School) in Dade County, South Florida. Believing they were only in exile for a short period, the educated, middle-class Cubans set up this Spanish–English bilingual school" (Baker, 2001, p. 186).

Since then, the number of bilingual and DL programs in the U.S. has grown and the gift of bilingualism has been shared with minority-language speakers as well as native English speakers.

According to prominent researchers in the field, the loss of ethnic native languages—English monolingualism—prevents minority immigrant students from developing their full potential (Ovando, 2003) and traps them in a cycle of poverty and failure (Valdés, 1997).

Thus, immersion programs have become not only a resource for native language preservation but a tool to provide equity of education to minority and immigrant learners.

As asserted by Valdés (1997), it is important for dual-language educators to "make every effort to ensure that minority-language children are being exposed to the highest-quality instruction possible in their native language. [DL educators] must grapple with the conflicts engendered by the fact that they must educate two very different groups of children in the same language" (p. 416).

We share Valdés's (1997) concerns about how minority languages are taught in immersion programs, which often follow the instructional and theoretical approaches of the dominant culture—English, in this case. To advance the conversation around effective pedagogical practices in K–8 dual-immersion classrooms, we must ask: how does the synergy of theoretical, practical, and linguistic components impact professional development in K–8 dual-language programs?

Professional Development in K–8 Dual-Language Programs

Professional development has been previously identified as one of the essential factors that form the core criteria of successful DL programs (Toledo-López and Pentón Herrera, 2015a; Alanís and Rodríguez, 2008). However, as aptly stated by Korthagen (2017), a major challenge in teacher education and professional development has been "the problem of moving from intellectual understanding of the theory to enactment in practice" (p. 388). Paradoxically, this statement is also true when professional development programs overemphasize practice over theories. The incongruent harmony between theory and practice found in professional development has been identified as a gap that can hinder student outcomes (Timperley et al., 2007) and the design of high-quality programs that target the needs of diverse young learners (Buysee, Castro, and Peisner-Feinberg, 2010). This means that, for professional development to be effective, it is necessary to provide an adequate balance between theory and practice, while acknowledging and understanding the linguistic realities of the learners involved.

For professional development to be impactful in DL programs, three elements must be addressed in synergy: (1) theory, (2) practice, and (3) language, as represented in Figure 1. In the theoretical component, we focus on the three goals of dual language: (a) bilingualism and biliteracy, (b) grade-level academic achievement in both program languages, and (c) sociocultural competence (Medina, 2017). In the practical component, we explain the orthographic differences between Spanish and English that impact reading instruction. Lastly, the linguistic component addresses the importance of having students make cross-linguistic connections between the two program languages.

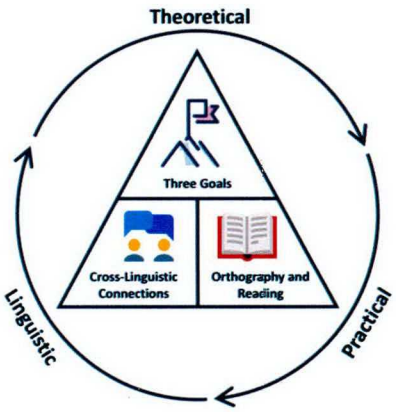


Figure 1. The synergy of theory, practice, and language in dual-language (Spanish–English) immersion programs

Theoretical Component: Three Goals

Without a clearly delineated language allocation plan that supports the three goals of DL education, it is difficult for students to reap the benefits of participating in such programs. A clear theoretical understanding of the research and pedagogical instructional best practices that align with the three goals is, thus, imperative.

Bilingualism and Biliteracy

Bilingualism is the ability emergent bilingual students have to speak, listen, and understand both program languages on a continuum. Historically, subtractive labels, such as limited English-proficient (LEP), have been used to describe students who are adding English to their linguistic repertoire while attending schools in the U.S. The term *emergent bilinguals*—used by most national organizations serving DL programs—adequately captures the additive nature of learning additional languages without the loss of home languages and cultures. Biliteracy, as an extension and deeper companion to

bilingualism, goes beyond the listening and speaking language domains and includes the students' capacity to read and write in both program languages while also being able to translate from one to the other. Traditionally, bilingual education models viewed native languages as a vehicle to facilitate students' English acquisition, whereas with a focus on biliteracy, a bidirectional transfer and emphasis on cross-linguistic comparison serve to strengthen both program languages (Medina, 2018).

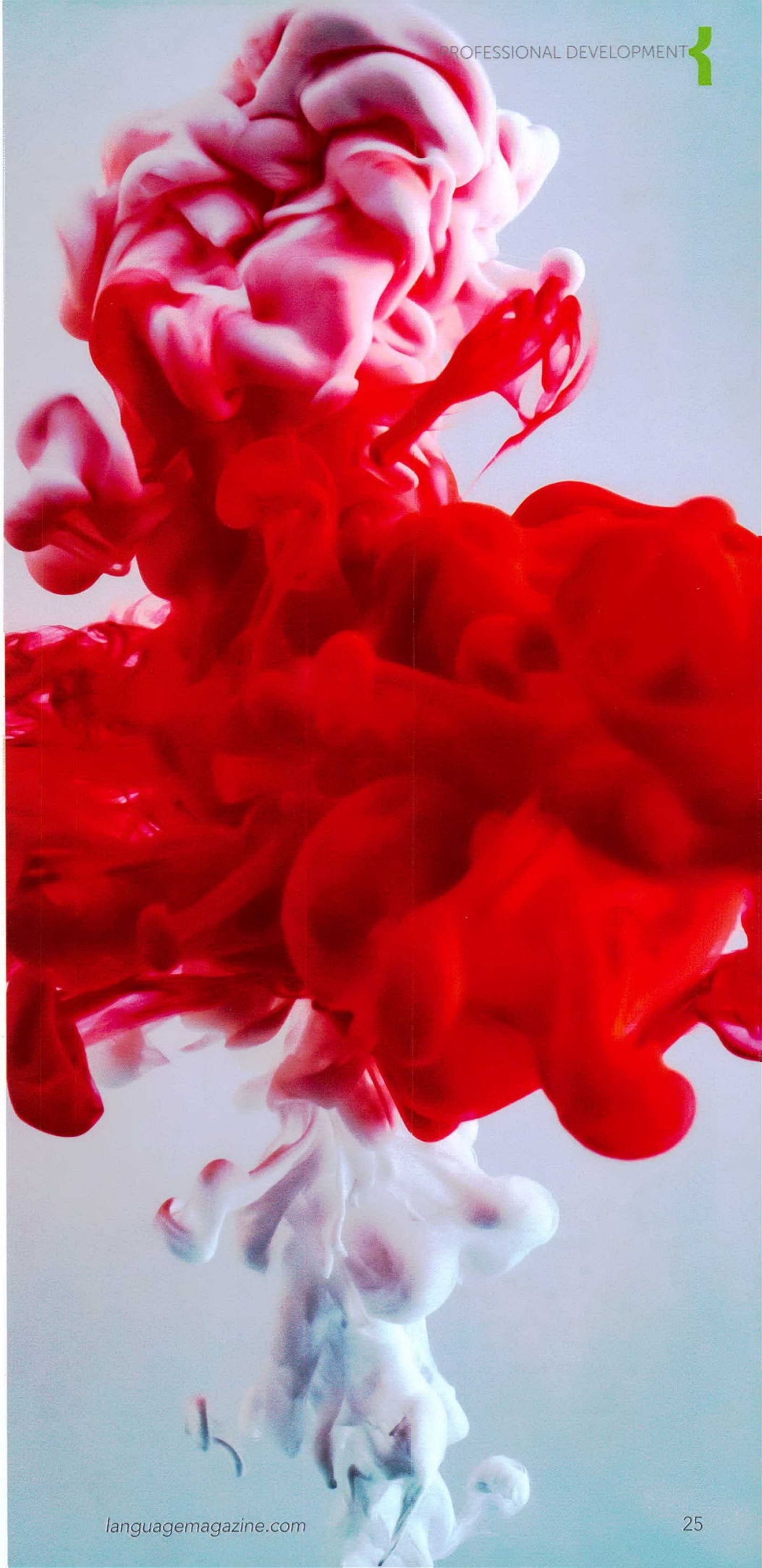
Grade-Level Academic Achievement in Both Program Languages

Instruction of emergent bilingual students in DL programs must be grounded in the standards used to meet district, state, and national expectations. However, students learning content through two languages must be able to meet all established benchmarks in both. It is not uncommon for DL educators to mistakenly focus on offering instruction in both English and Spanish only in core content areas (i.e., language arts, science, social studies, and mathematics). Nonetheless, best practices dictate that students must also meet grade-level expectations in special classes, to include physical education, music, and/or art. Additionally, special education services and/or gifted and talented support must be provided in both program languages (Howard et al., 2018; Kennedy and Medina, 2017). The language of instruction guides the language of support. For example, DL practitioners would not provide reading or dyslexia services in English when the student's instructional need is in Spanish.

Sociocultural Competence

Sociocultural competence is the ability to see the similarities and differences in each other but viewing that which is diverse as an asset and an opportunity to connect rather than an obstacle to overcome (Medina, 2018). DL stakeholders—including students, staff, district leadership, parents, and community members—engaging in self-reflection and dialogue about bias, privilege, discrimination, empathy, and equity are a nonnegotiable in DL programming. Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2011) describe this type of self-analysis and critical conversation in schools as a paradigm shift that allows individuals and organizations to effectively describe, respond to, and plan for issues that arise in diverse environments.

Without an explicit focus on sociocultural competence as a critical goal of DL education, emergent bilingual students will



not be exposed to divergent ideologies that fortify their ability to positively interact with and impact the global community in which they exist. Furthermore, DL stakeholders will never fully embrace their duty as defenders of equity and social justice (Medina, 2018).

Practical Component: Orthographic Differences and Reading Instruction

The three goals of DL programs provide the theoretical foundation that drives the reading instruction taking place in the biliteracy classroom. Without a clear understanding of the additive nature of the DL program model and its desired outcomes, teachers risk facilitating instruction in Spanish that is guided through an English-only, monolingual lens. Therefore, it is imperative that DL educators understand initial literacy in both Spanish and English to successfully bridge theory into practice (Toledo-López and Pentón Herrera, 2015b). Effective practical applications of theory in DL education serve as a way to provide biliteracy reading support that is authentic to each of the two languages while also creating connections between them.

Mora (2016) writes that, as a transparent language, Spanish includes 27 letters that represent 24 phonemes. English, on the other hand, is an opaque language that includes between 40 and 52 phonemes produced by 26 alphabet letters. As explained by Mora (2016), there are only five sounds produced by the vowels in Spanish. The same is not true for English, where the five vowels can result in 15 vowel sounds and thus add to the murky nature of the language. This linguistic variation impacts the way in which lessons need to be planned and facilitated. For example, in Spanish, the majority of words are easily decodable because of the focus on regular syllabic rules, while in English a focus on initial consonant sound is most common in initial literacy practices (Morris and Rosado, 2013).

The synergy between theory and practice is solidified via the language instruction that takes place in the DL classroom. The contrastive analysis of the two program languages serves to remind DL educators that some imperative practices to support initial literacy in English are not needed in Spanish. As an example, word walls are used in most U.S. classrooms, including those in DL programs. However, because of the transparency of the Spanish language, a traditional word wall focusing on initial consonant sound does not fully support initial literacy in Spanish. Instead, environmental print or anchor chart support should target syllabic work or tricky letters—*letras tramposas*, in Spanish—like the silent *h*, *b/v*, *c/s/z*, or *c/k/q* (Beeman and Urow, 2013).

Other practices that are English focused but are commonly incorporated in DL classrooms where Spanish is the language of instruction include sight words, onset-rime, and guided reading. In learning to read in English, sight words are extremely useful for fluidity and comprehension. Rhyming words in English, such as *top*, *hop*, and *cop*, are imperative because students are able to generate and learn word families. In Spanish, because words are easily decodable, these practices are not needed (Mora, 2016). Guided reading is also an instructional practice that is used in most DL programs, even though it is not a pedagogical strategy used in initial Spanish literacy. Teachers utilizing guided reading in Spanish biliteracy classrooms can modify the teaching point—especially after students have learned to decode—to focus on comprehension and cross-linguistic connections. In doing so, the teacher better aligns biliteracy instructional practices with the specific needs of emergent bilingual students enrolled in DL programs (Medina, 2017).

Linguistic Component: Making Cross-Linguistic Connections

Language biliteracy instruction that is grounded in the three goals of DL and also in the practitioner implementation of reading pedagogical strategies that are authentic to each of the program languages must include student understanding of the similarities and differences between English and Spanish literacy components. Beeman and Urow (2013) define the "bridge" as the planned and essential moment when teachers and students engage in contrastive linguistic comparison that brings content and language together. In this way, students explicitly transfer what is learned in English to Spanish and vice versa, eliminating the need for DL teachers to reteach content. The authors add that during this important instructional moment, students may compare and contrast Spanish and English phonology, morphology, syntax and grammar, and pragmatics.

In bilingual education programs, teachers have been historically encouraged to strictly separate the two languages, but in biliteracy classroom settings, cross-linguistic connections are imperative as a means to achieve the outcomes promised through DL programming. The three ways to create a bridge include side-by-side, illustration or diagram, and *así se dice*—"this is how you say it," in English (Beeman and Urow, 2013). A side-by-side anchor chart brings together content vocabulary, cognates, or phrases in both languages that provide linguistic support for emergent bilingual students.

An illustration or diagram that is labeled in both program languages is the second type of bridge that can be used to further cross-linguistic connections in the biliteracy

classroom. Finally, the third type of bridge, adapted from Kathy Escamilla's work at the Bueno Center, is *así se dice* (see Escamilla et al., 2013). Students, with teacher support, select a piece of writing in either program language and, through a series of structured steps, paraphrase through translation. As this process occurs, the contrastive analysis takes place by comparing and contrasting the identified linguistic elements, strengthening the emergent bilingual students' ability to fully utilize their entire linguistic repertoires.

Final Thoughts

Different to monolingual programs, DL instruction focuses on developing the learners' interpersonal and academic vocabulary in English and in the target language, while also ensuring academic content knowledge and competency in both. Thus, impactful professional development in DL education becomes not only a need but a foundation that ensures successful implementation and practice.

Historically, professional development has been offered through a subtractive and monolingual lens where the goal is to transition students to English-only instruction. For DL professional development to be successful, it needs to be conceived, planned, and facilitated with a biliteracy and bilingual focus in mind. If DL educators are tasked with establishing and maintaining appropriate and effective didactic approaches to teach literacy to emergent bilingual learners, then the professional support provided to them must align with those goals. However, this can only be accomplished with continuous guidance and meaningful training that addresses best current practices in the field. It is our hope that literacy coaches, DL educators, and DL stakeholders—at all levels—find tools that will help them advance their programs by considering the specificities of initial literacy acquisition in both languages.

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