

Two-Way Bilingual Immersion: American Sign Language and English

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Abstract

Two-way bilingual immersion programs are in use all over America. Classes in these programs are conducted in two languages, and students are native speakers of the languages used. This paper outlines a bilingual immersion class in which English and American Sign Language were used. Half of the students were hearing and half were deaf. This two-way class was taught at Camden County College in Blackwood, NJ, in the summer of 1998. Course content included phonological and morphological aspects of American Sign Language and English. Some of the lectures were signed in ASL; some lectures were conducted in written English via a computer network system. The paper discusses two-way programs in America and describes the class content, presentations, challenges, and results of the Camden County College class. Examples of lessons, presentations, and student feedback are included.

History of American Two-Way Programs

Two-way bilingual immersion programs (TWI), sometimes called “developmental bilingual programs,” “two-way bilingual education,” or “dual language education,” are a combination of bilingual programs and immersion programs (Lindholm, 1987, p. 12). TWI programs take features from these two bilingual worlds of immersion. *Bilingual* programs begin with students being taught in their native language. The goal is for students to shift into English as the language

of instruction. *Immersion* programs differ in that the language of instruction is the students’ second language (Christian, 1996a; Howard and Christian, 1997). *TWI programs*, on the other hand, maintain two languages in the classroom. Both are valued; both are used. In two-way classes, there are two groups of students: one group from the majority language and one from the minority language (Christian, 1996a; Howard and Loeb, 1998; Lindholm, 1987). The interaction of native speakers is most advantageous to language learning (Howard and Christian, 1997).

Programs in the United States that utilize two languages in the classroom have three important goals. First, it is hoped that students will achieve high levels of proficiency in their first and second languages (Christian, 1996a). Not only will they learn about both languages, they will also understand and appreciate the cultures involved (Howard and Christian, 1997; Lindholm, 1987). Next, students are expected to do well in academic subjects, which are taught in both languages. And third, students will hopefully develop positive attitudes towards both languages and towards themselves (Howard and Christian, 1997). This last goal is especially crucial for minority students who have traditionally felt like second-class citizens in American language classrooms (Christian, 1996b, Howard and Loeb, 1998).

Most TWI programs begin in elementary schools and run from kindergarten through the sixth grade. Some continue into junior high, and a few continue through high school. TWI programs are scattered around the United States, with the highest number (in descending order) in Cali-

ifornia, New York, and Massachusetts. No matter where these programs are located, they share similar features (Christian, 1996b).

All TWI programs have students of two languages in one classroom, preferably an equal number of students speaking each language. One language is used at a time to teach all subjects: language and content-area subjects (Christian, 1996a; 1996b; Howard and Loeb, 1998; Lindholm, 1987). Classes are team-taught. Although both teachers are bilingual, one teacher speaks the majority language; the other teacher, the minority language (Howard and Christian, 1997; Lindholm, 1987). Students receive content-area instruction together, sometimes in one language and sometimes in the other. The percentage of time that each language is used varies from one program to the next. Some use each language 50% of the time from the onset. Others begin at 90/10; still others, 80/20. The ultimate goal is to use each language 50% of the time (Christian, 1996a; Lindholm, 1987). Most TWI programs employ Spanish paired with English, though several programs around the country have Portuguese, Cantonese, Korean, Navajo, Japanese, or French as their minority language (Christian, 1996a; 1996b; Howard and Christian, 1997). The number of programs around the United States has grown considerably. McCargo and Christian (1998) found that in 1987 there were approximately 30 TWI programs in this country. By 1998, that number had increased to 225 (cited in Howard and Loeb, 1998).

Results of TWI programs are promising. By the fifth grade, many students in these programs demonstrate proficiency in both the majority and minority languages (Christian 1996a; 1996b; Mahr and Christian, 1993). Also, the students' academic performance in two-way programs is equal to, or greater than, that of students in regular classes (Mahr and Christian, 1993). It's impressive to note that TWI programs lead to a change in attitude among minority students studying a second language. These students often held the view that their native language was subordinate to the target language, and they acted accordingly. Native language use, students believed, was reserved for informal situations, while the target language was used in more formal situations, such as in schools. However, by including both languages, TWI programs give equal status to the native and target languages. Minority students

leave these programs feeling more positive about their native language (Tarone and Swain, 1995).

The Use of American Sign Language in a Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Program

The concept of using American Sign Language (ASL) in a two-way bilingual immersion program is a relatively new idea. It is being done successfully in Laurent Clerc Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona. This unique version of a TWI program combines hearing and deaf students who are fluent in English and ASL, respectively. The program began as a K-3 program in 1997 with thirteen students. Since that time, it has been expanded to include almost 60 students. Parents and teachers alike are delighted with the children's progress in both English and American Sign Language (Tapia, 1997).

Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Course at Camden County College

As mentioned above, most of the TWI programs in America serve elementary and secondary students in intensive two-way environments that may continue for years. In the summer of 1998, an eight-week, experimental two-way bilingual immersion course was offered to deaf and hearing adults at Camden County College (CCC) in Blackwood, New Jersey. Enrollment in this class was limited to an equal number of deaf ASL signers and hearing English speakers. Twelve students registered. Having an equal number of deaf and hearing students allowed the class to be paired into six teams for class presentations.

The six deaf participants in the two-way class were either students at the college or worked in some capacity in the Interpreter Education Program. One student was an adjunct professor who taught American Sign Language at the college. Another was a tutor and lab assistant in the Interpreter Education Program. We also had two international deaf students in the class. As is the norm in deaf education, none of our deaf students had studied ASL formally in their elementary, junior high, or high school settings.

The hearing participants were all students or graduates of the Interpreter Education Program at Camden County College. All of them had completed at least three courses in American Sign Lan-

guage. One student was a graduate of the Interpreter Education Program and had recently been hired as a teacher of the deaf at a local elementary school. Another was about to graduate upon completion of this course.

The teachers of the TWI class at CCC are assistant professors at the college. Both are hearing. They received Master's degrees from Gallaudet University (the only liberal arts college for the deaf in Washington, DC). Ms. Falvo, whose degree is in Linguistics, teaches English to the deaf students; Mr. Klucsarits, who has a degree in Interpretation, teaches ASL and interpreting to hearing students. The teachers "solicited" students for the TWI class by promoting the two-way idea to students in their spring courses.

Challenges

Both groups of students faced similar challenges in the two-way class. Many of them believed there exists an exact, one-to-one equivalence between English words and ASL signs. Students working between ASL and English often ignore context when working between ASL and English.

Syntax also poses problems for students. A common concern in TWI programs is that second language students will, at times, fall back on the syntax of their first language, resulting in a mix of their first and second languages. (Genesee, 1999). Many of our students did muddle ASL and English grammar. This occurred for two reasons. First, some students had been under the mistaken impression that the proper way to sign, especially in school, was by coding English: using a "signed English" system. Johnson, Liddell, and Erting (1989), discuss the problems associated with codes of English, which attempt to represent English grammar by modifying American Sign Language (p.5). Second, many of the students were unfamiliar with grammatical rules of both their native language and the target language.

A conscious effort was made in the CCC class to avoid English codes. We also discouraged signing and speaking at the same time, which, by its very nature, is a form of coded English. American Sign Language was used during classroom discussions. No voice is used when signing ASL.

Codes of English present still another, complex problem. Over the years, deaf people have struggled to understand the signing of hearing people who code English, which is extremely dif-

ferent from ASL. The deaf have also struggled to make themselves understood (to hearing people) by altering their ASL signing to be more "English-like." This use of a "contact language" is common when hearing and deaf people interact (Valli and Lucas, 1995). However, the reliance on contact language clouded the judgment of our deaf students, who were asked to model ASL for the hearing students and critique their partners' ASL summaries. We found that the deaf students accepted these summaries, not on the basis of their ASL accuracy, but on the degree to which the hearing students' contact language was understood.

Most two-way programs in America employ two spoken languages, and most of these languages have both a spoken and written form. In the class at CCC, this was not the case. ASL has no written form. Therefore, when ASL stories were incorporated into the class, video recordings were used.

Spoken English presented a unique difference between this TWI course and most bilingual immersion programs: deaf students have no access to spoken language. As a result, for English interactions, we used a computer chat program.

The classroom had eleven computers that were linked so that students and teachers could send and receive messages. We did not attempt to teach our deaf students how to *speak* English; we relied on English in print.

Finally, the deaf students had extremely varied backgrounds. Some had attended residential schools for the deaf while others were mainstreamed with hearing students throughout much of their educational careers. While the former group had had a great deal of exposure to the language and culture of the Deaf Community, the latter group had less. In addition, deaf students began the TWI class with distinct levels of English fluency.

Class Principles and Goals

At the beginning of the semester, we established the following class principles. An inherent characteristic in our class was that equal respect be given to both languages (Christian, 1996a). We designed the class so that American Sign Language and English would be used equally throughout the semester. Our goal was for a 50/50 approach, believing that students learn language best when the language is *used*, not merely *explained*

(Genesee, 1999). In addition, we asked that respect be given to all class participants as language learners and that students be accepting of classmates' limitations.

A major goal of the class at CCC was to bring together deaf and hearing students who were trying to master a second language. Our aim was to explore and contrast language features of both ASL and English, as well as to improve students' first and second language abilities. Students and teachers modeled both ASL and English to discuss the grammar of the two languages. This sharing allowed students to contribute meaningfully to the class (Tucker, 1990). Our TWI class encouraged student interaction and dialogue in an environment that was fully accessible to both groups of students (Lindholm, 1987).

Class Content

The two-way bilingual immersion class at CCC met twice a week for eight weeks, a total of 16 sessions. During the first four weeks, the course focused on morphology. Both English and ASL features having parallel (or similar) forms were included. When the focus was subject-object agreement verbs in ASL, for instance, the English parallel presented was SVO construction. Since both languages make use of compounding, this topic was also taught during the first four weeks using examples in ASL and English. (See Appendix A for the lesson on compounding). The focus of the second half of the course was syntax. For example, role shift and eye gaze in ASL parallel direct and indirect speech in English. Also, we explained similarities and differences between rhetorical questions in both languages. Another topic in syntax was conditional sentences in ASL and English (appendix B shows the lesson on conditionals).

As the semester went on, we realized that we had included a great many grammatical features, and teaching these features required more time than we had allotted. We had anticipated short, quick lessons for many of the structures we'd planned to teach. That turned out to be more the exception than the rule.

Class Presentations

Each deaf student was paired with a hearing student. Each pair was required to present every two weeks, incorporating examples of the features we had recently taught. The presentations included a summary of each of the following: an ASL story on videotape, an English story by O'Henry, a taped TV situation comedy, and a short novel by John Steinbeck. Students decided to do two of these presentations with the same partner. For the first and last presentations, students kept the same partner. For the second and third, they worked with someone new. Each student summarized the work in his second language. The deaf students typed their English summaries and showed them to the class using an overhead projector. (See Appendix C for excerpts.) The hearing students signed their summaries to the class in ASL. All presentations were videotaped.

Students quickly learned that these summaries required a great deal of time outside of class, since each person was responsible for helping his partner create an accurate summary. We were told that many practice sessions were held and numerous revisions were made before the pair was ready to address the class.

After one pair presented summaries in class, each student illustrated the grammatical points he had recently learned in his second language. The grammatical features were built into the ASL and English summaries. For example, if direct and indirect speech were recent English topics, the deaf student found a way to include an example of these in his typed summary. The hearing partner included role shift in his ASL summary as a parallel to the direct and indirect speech of English. The examples became the focus of the students' discussions.

Initially, the purpose of asking students to include examples of grammatical features was to help us assess their mastery of the material taught. What we didn't expect were the fascinating class discussions that followed all presentations. Lively interactions ensued in which students analyzed their use (or misuse) of language. Consequently, we had not anticipated the extra time needed to complete presentations. Near the end of the semester, when we realized we were running out of time, students agreed to extend the summer session and have a seventeenth class. All of our students felt it was important to allow ample time

for everyone to present. They didn't want to compromise the remaining presenters. Nor did students want to bypass or hurry through the subsequent class discussions.

Perspectives

As teachers, this two-way bilingual course using English and ASL was truly inspiring. Students not only took this course, they became *part* of it. Some students would stop us in the hall to tell us of out-of-class discussions they'd had with classmates regarding a form we'd studied. This was especially gratifying, since social interaction is a major element of second language learning (Howard and Christian, 1997). During class, students listened attentively to classmates who explained their use of particular features. There was laughter, lots of interchange, and contagious enthusiasm.

Students reacted favorably to the TWI course. We received many positive comments from them. (See Appendix D for the journal statements made by students.) We now have a waiting list of hearing students who would like to take this course. Two of the students who completed the course would like to take it again. The student who teaches deaf children has told us that she often includes features of the TWI class in her teaching. The ASL teacher suggested that his wife (who also teaches ASL) take the course. All of our students recommended that this experimental course be made a permanent one in our college. Camden County College has since approved the Two-Way Bilingual Immersion course.

Future Changes

In hindsight, some changes could be made to improve a TWI class using American Sign Language and English. First and foremost, the teachers should be native speakers of the languages used in class: one hearing, native English speaker and a deaf, native signer. Another important change would be to have a less ambitious syllabus, eliminating some of the grammatical features taught. This would allow teachers to spend more time on the features retained in the course. The requirements for class presentations would also change. Rather than asking students to do four presentations per semester, we would reduce that number and request that stu-

dents videotape revisions. Next, in order to encourage students to do an equal amount of work in both languages and to become better language models, a portion of each student's grade would be based on the content of his partner's presentation. We hope this would help to alleviate the problem of deaf students' acceptance of ungrammatical ASL. Finally, a two-way bilingual immersion approach could be expanded to content area courses, rather than limiting the concept to language classes (Tucker, 1990). With these improvements, the next two-way bilingual immersion experience at Camden County College can be more rewarding than the first.

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APPENDIX A

COMPOUNDS

(Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Valli and Lucas, 1995)

Definition: Compounding is a morphological process in which a new word is created by joining two existing words. There are phonological indicators for compound words.

English:

Phonological process:

Two words are brought together to form a new word.

The stress on the second word in the compound is reduced.

Example: home work

homework

Morphological result:

A new word is created with a new meaning.

The meaning of the new word tends to be more specific.

Example:

Green house: a house which is green.

Greenhouse: a building made primarily of glass for the cultivation of plants.

3. The new word will tend to be the same part of speech as the second word in the compound.

Example: green house greenhouse
(adj.) (noun) (noun)

(Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, p. 35)

ASL:

Phonological process:

Two words are brought together to form a new word with a new meaning.

All internal and repetitive movement is eliminated.

The first or only contact hold of the first sign is kept; the rest is eliminated.

The non-dominant hand anticipates the second sign.

Morphological result:

A new word is created with a new meaning.

The meaning of the new word is more specific.

(Valli and Lucas, pp. 57-62)

APPENDIX B

CONDITIONALS

(Celce-Maurcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, pp. 548 - 550)

Facts about conditionals:

- * Conditional relationships involve a condition: a situation with respect to circumstances.
- * Topics discussed depend upon conditions given in the sentences.
- * Conditional sentences have two clauses:
 - a dependent clause (the “if” clause), and
 - an independent clause (the “then” clause).
- * Conditionals are used to show three different semantic relationships:
 - factual
 - predictive
 - imaginative

FACTUAL CONDITIONALS state truths.

- * Generic: If water is frozen, it becomes ice.
- * Habitual: If Tom cleans the living room, Sally cleans the bathroom.

PREDICTIVE CONDITIONALS state events that are likely to happen.

- * If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert.

- * If it snows, class will be canceled.

IMAGINATIVE CONDITIONALS

- * Hypothetical — unlikely to happen
 - If I won the lottery, I’d do lots of traveling.
- * Counterfactual — subjunctive
 - If I were you, I’d keep my mouth shut.

ASL CONDITIONALS

(Cokely, and Baker, 1980; Humprhries and Padden, 1992)

- * Eyebrows are raised.
- * Head is tilted to the side.
- * A short pause may be included.
- * The sign # IF may or may not be included.

ENGLISH CONDITIONALS

- * If the dependent clause is first, it is set off with a comma.
The independent clause may or may not have the word, “then.”

EX.: If I pass this course, I’ll be thrilled.

- * If the independent clause is first, there is no comma.
The word “then” is not used.

EX.: I’ll be thrilled if I pass this course!

APPENDIX C

EXCERPTS FROM STUDENT EXAMPLES

[NOTE: English examples are given below. ASL examples were signed during class.]

1. TV Situation Comedy
Third Rock From the Sun
(paraphrased summary)

Grammatical feature: Topic/Comment

The commander made a request of the dean. He asked the dean to move a ramp to the front of the building. The commander didn’t realize that the dean herself was in a wheelchair. She responded, “We can handle it right away.” The commander responded, “Rubber-stamping — even better!”

English topic: Rubber-stamping

2. Short Story
“One Thousand Dollars”
by O’Henry

Grammatical Features Included

1. TENSE: Gillian’s uncle *had* recently *died*.
2. NOUN/VERB PAIR: Gillian got in the taxi and told the *driver* to *drive* Gillian to his lawyer’s office.
3. Novel
Tortilla Flat
by John Steinbeck

The story begins with Danny, the main character, arriving home from World War II. Upon doing so, Danny discovers that his grandfather has died and he has inherited two houses in Tortilla Flat.

One night, a drunken Danny met his friend, Pilon, in the woods. He asked Pilon, “Do you have any wine?” “Of course I do,” said Pilon. “What would make you think otherwise?” Danny laughed and the two of them sat and drank. Danny told Pilon about his houses and asked Pilon if he wanted to live with him. Pilon accepted. While they were staying in the house, Pilon felt very uncomfortable there. He asked Danny, “Can I rent your other house for \$15.00 per month?” Danny agreed.

Grammatical Features

ASL: Role shift between Danny and Pilon
English: Direct speech

1. He asked Pilon, “Do you have any wine?” “Of course I do,” said Pilon. “What would make you think otherwise?”
2. He asked Danny, “Can I rent your other house for \$15.00 per month?”

English:

- Indirect speech
 1. Pilon accepted.
 2. Danny agreed.
- 4. Novel
The Red Pony
by John Steinbeck

The Red Pony is a story about Carl and Ruth Tiffin, and their ten-year-old son, Jody. The Tiffin family live on a farm, along with Billy Buck, who is a hired hand and cares for the animals.

One day, Jody’s father called him out to the horse stable. Jody was a little nervous and tried to think of something that he may have done wrong. When Jody got to the stable, he found that his father had bought him a brand new pony at the sheriff’s auction and a show saddle as well! Carl and Billy Buck were both happy to see Jody so excited. Billy Buck asked Jody, “What are you going to name him?” Jody had to think a minute. “If he doesn’t already have a name, I think I will name him Gabilan,” said Jody.

Grammatical Feature

Conditionals
“If he doesn’t already have a name, I think I will name him Gabilan,” said Jody.

APPENDIX D
TWI JOURNAL

WHAT HAVE YOU ENJOYED ABOUT HIS CLASS SO FAR? WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR FAVORITE ACTIVITY?

- I enjoyed this class. I have learned a lot about two languages. I never thought that ASL has role shift, classifiers, topics, etc. What is my favorite activity? I liked the ASL videotape and TV program. But of course, I liked reading the book.

- My favorite activity has been discussions.
- I enjoyed learning a lot in English, but sometimes English was hard for me. But that’s good, because I learned a lot about English.
- I liked getting feedback about how to improve my signing skills.

- I've enjoyed the mix of Deaf and hearing students and learning the grammatical rules of *both* languages.
- The two instructors signing so fast, it was a wonderful challenge to understand them both.

WHAT HAVE YOU NOT ENJOYED ABOUT THIS CLASS SO FAR? WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT THIS CLASS?

- I would like to do less homework.
- I understand this is an 8 week course; however, the projects seem to be very time-consuming. No time for summer fun.
- I didn't like using the computer.
- Scheduling conflicts with my partner. I'm not sure exactly what I'd change, because though conflicts were annoying, the benefits of the class far outweigh the tedious annoyances.
- The computer was confusing.

WHAT MORE WOULD YOU LIKE TO LEARN?

- I would like to learn everything, but I understand you don't have time to teach everything.

- I would like to do more projects, because they are a lot of fun.
- The deaf students want to use the computer more.
- I think it might be good to share what individuals learned from their partners.
- More presentations!!

WHAT SHOULD BE DECREASED?

- Less projects so we can polish our projects.
- Computer. Why, because I can't type fast.

ARE THERE ANY OTHER COMMENTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE?

- I would like this class to continue next year. This class is really awesome!! I'll give you "A" for this class! HA! HA!
- I liked the cooperation with partners all the time.
- Please!! Schedule more bilingual classes.
- It's a great class.