Multilingual Students in Monolingual Schools: 
Enhancing the Status of ESL Students

Chris Castellarin 
Vancouver, British Columbia

The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language.
—Ezra Pound, in the ABC of Reading

In today’s global economy, multilingualism is an asset that is sought after. However, the public school system in British Columbia seems determined to teach all students as if they were a brand of generic, white, monocultural, monolingual children. Yet the reality within our schools is far from monocultural or monolingual. In many schools upwards of twenty or more languages are spoken, and English-only speaking students often make up a small minority of a school’s population. I believe that the students in our schools are subject to a “hidden agenda” designed to maintain the monolingual status of our education system. By expecting students to learn to read, write, listen to, and speak in English only, and by ensuring that the first languages of non-English speakers are dismissed we are systematically allowing for the loss of childrens’ linguistic abilities. In my opinion, this is a systemic error. My research investigates the possibility that our schools have much to gain by revising the approach to second languages, and treating them as assets to be recognized, encouraged and even taught rather than deficits to be “fixed” or burdens to discard.

Educators not only have justification to be proactive advocates for childrens’ linguistic rights, they have the ethical responsibility to do so. As educators, we need to create a climate in the schools where the linguistic and cultural experiences of children are actively accepted and validated (Cummins (a) 7). Unfortunately, across the province in British Columbia’s public schools, this is, in most instances, not the case.

Making Use of Other Languages:

Some teachers assume that their sole responsibility is teaching children to read and write in English and that other languages have no part to play in this process. However, research has
shown that our understandings of the ways we learn have greatly expanded in recent years. It is much clearer now that the cognitive skills associated with literacy are not acquired separately in different languages. Increasing numbers of teachers view opportunities for speaking, reading, and writing in other languages as an important way to consolidate and extend children’s competencies, and not as an obstacle to acquiring skills in English (Edwards, 1995, 17).

A learner’s first language (L1) can be an important learning tool as they catch up to their peers in the second language (L2). Some experts warn that students who stop developing their first language before they have acquired considerable competence in the second may not possess sufficient proficiency in either language to carry out some academic tasks. “Continued development of the first language supports linguistic and cognitive development in English, enabling students to think, talk, read, and write at a higher level than if they were restricted to using English only” (Coelho, 2004, 155). In fact, over the past twenty years, evidence has accumulated that linguistic, cognitive, and affective advantages accrue to students who develop literacy skills in two or more languages and continue biliterate development at least through elementary school. This form of bilingualism has been termed additive bilingualism because a second language is added to a student’s repertoire of skills at no cost to the maintenance of the first language (Cummins & Schecter, 2003, 5).

The Situation in Vancouver:

In a February 2007 article published in the Vancouver Sun newspaper, Janet Steffenhagen writes,

“English has become a foreign language in many B.C. public schools due to a growing number of immigrant and refugee students, but few people take English as a Second Language studies seriously. B.C. teachers are not routinely taught in university how to deliver ESL lessons... As well, many immigrant families regard ESL as a ghetto that students should escape as soon as possible and schools are often so multicultural that English is only spoken in the classroom. The way ESL is taught today is based on the notion that the language of the school is English and students will hear English spoken in the hallways, the lunchrooms, and in the playgrounds. But that’s not always the case. Some students say the only person they hear speaking English is their teacher” (Steffenhagen, 2007, February 12).

There has been a great deal of debate over how to address the issue of teaching ESL students and there are a number of pedagogical models such as pull-out programs, quick-exit immersion classes, sheltered classes and dual-language or two-way bilingual options. All of these are discussed in further detail later in this paper. Most educators agree that the need for educating ESL students will become an increasing priority. Steffenhagen states, “The challenges of teaching ESL in BC will continue to grow, with projections that one in three British Columbians will be foreign-born by 2017” (Steffenhagen, 2007, February 12).

The Inspiration:

Published research into the “open use” of first/home languages in classrooms dates back more than twenty years, often with researchers focusing on the performance of “fully integrated bilingual programs” and various other forms of ESL programs currently in use in schools around the world. A great deal of research comes out of England, Denmark, the United States, and to a lesser extent, Canada. Researchers such as Elizabeth Coelho and Vivien Edwards have published a number of articles focusing on ESL programs. However,
just in shear volume of articles published on multilingualism in schools, James Crawford and Jim Cummins appear to lead the research. A great deal of their work focuses on multilingual students in monolingual classrooms, and I refer to a number of articles written by all of these researchers throughout this paper.

Action research conducted by Patricia Chow and Jim Cummins at Thornwood Elementary Public School, located in Mississauga Ontario, describes several teaching concepts at Thornwood Elementary where the students share in the over forty languages spoken at the school. Chow and Cummins’ published their observations, analyses, and findings at Thornwood in the article, Valuing Multilingual and Multicultural Approaches to Learning, which subsequently became the inspiration and bases for this research paper.

The aim of my action research was to duplicate the project done at Thornwood, but on a smaller scale - two classes of 50 children in total - as opposed to an entire school population of over 400. Using the Thornwood project as a guideline, I investigate how we as educators can try to “enhance the status” of multilingual and/or ESL children through the promotion and “open use” of students’ first/home languages in a monolingual (English only) classroom setting. In order to measure the enhanced status of ESL students I have subjectively taken into account the increased “pride” ESL students feel in their ability to use a language other than English at school, as well as the “envy” English-only students may feel towards ESL students’ linguistic abilities. It should be noted that in connection with the research it was my intention that the importance of teaching ESL students how to communicate beyond just learning to read and write in English should not in any way be diminished by also including their first/home language within the context of everyday classroom/school life, on the contrary, I believe their status is enhanced by it.

Research Question:

Therefore, the question related to this research study is - Will the inclusion of first/home languages other than English, implemented through literacy activities, enhance the status of multilingual and/or ESL children in the eyes of their classroom peers?

The Research Setting:

The research setting consists of a public elementary school located on the West side of Vancouver city, with students enrolled from kindergarten to grade seven. The language of instruction at the school is English, although the school offers instruction in French as a subject taught in 40-minute blocks twice a week to grades 5, 6, and 7 only.

The school’s population during the time of research consisted of approximately 435 students, 41% of who speak English only, 26% of who speak Mandarin or Cantonese and an additional 18% who speak Korean. There is also a smaller cross-section of various other languages represented at the school consisting of 3% Japanese, 2% other Asian languages (Indonesian, Malay, and Thai), 6% European languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, and German), 3% Middle Eastern languages (Hebrew, Farsi and Arabic) and 1% other languages. In some cases, there are children who may be the only ones capable of speaking a particular language within the school, and some of them are completely fluent in English, so they have therefore never received ESL recognition. In a sense, this last group of bilingual students blends in with the English-only population at the school, but their linguistic and cultural experiences go almost completely unrecognized and invalidated.

Research Participants:

The two classes involved in the research study consist of a grade 1 and a grade 5 class.
Both classes were combined as part of a “Buddy” program held for 40 minutes during each Tuesday afternoon from September to June (2006-2007). Data was collected during the months of February and March 2007. The total number of students combined from both the grade 1 and grade 5 classes who spoke a language other than or in addition to English, whether fluently or partially, consisted of 43% of the group, and the number of students who spoke English only consisted of 57% of the group.

When matching grade 1 students with a grade 5 “Buddy,” students were chosen who spoke the same language. But in some instances, English-only students were matched with students who also spoke another language. A wide range of languages were identified in the two classes including Tagalog (1 student), Spanish (1), Arabic (1), Finnish (1), Farsi (1), Hebrew (1), Cantonese or Mandarin (8) and Korean (8).

**Identifying Language Use – (Initial Student Survey Results)**

One of the first steps in the research was to give an Initial Student Survey in order to determine the attitudes towards languages other than English in the school environment. Students were given additional space on the survey to expand upon their answers and to clarify why they had chosen a particular answer. A selection of responses from the grade 5 students is included below.

**Question 1 in the Student Survey: Do you think it is O.K. for students to speak, or write in languages other than English at school?**

The majority of the students felt that a language other than English could be used to some degree at school. Some of the ESL students’ answers included the observation that, “it was easier to think, plan, get help or get clarification on something” if they spoke in their L1. They felt that being able to ask for help from another student who spoke the same language as them was beneficial. Others felt that it was difficult not to speak in an L1 if their peers also spoke the language. One student was worried about forgetting his language if he did not use it often enough.

The English-only speaking students who selected “Yes” felt that ESL students should have the “right” to speak their languages. Another felt if students could not read, write or speak English very well that they might be excluded and therefore using their L1 rather than English was only fair. Others felt that ESL students might be more comfortable communicating in their own language. A few indicated that it was “nice” or “cool” to hear other languages spoken around them.

The ESL students who answered “Sometimes” stated that if they used their L1 at inopportune times, then English only speakers may think they were being rude. Others felt it was alright because it is sometimes fun to speak in their L1 and that they deserved the opportunity to be able to use their language. A few students felt it was not a problem to speak their L1 during playtime or to ask for help on a question in class.

The English-only speaking students who selected an answer of “Sometimes” expressed the opinion that it would be okay for students to use their L1 in school only if their teacher
allowed them to do so. Some students even placed a time limit on the allowance of other languages being used such as, “It was okay during their own free or personal time but not during actual class or instructional time.”

Only a few students selected an answer of “No,” and the majority of these students were ESL. They expressed their choice of “No” more from a perceived point of fairness. They gave explanations such as, “The teacher may not understand them,” or “Others might think they are telling secrets or saying bad things.” A couple of the ESL students selected “No” because they felt that they were here to learn English and speaking their home language during school time would somehow interfere with their learning.

In addition to the Initial Student Survey, I also conducted a group interview with five students from the grade 5 class who spoke other languages in addition to English. The languages spoken by the group included Korean, Cantonese, Hebrew, Tagalog, and Finnish. The interview was recorded and their responses transcribed. Their names were changed in order to conceal their identities and I am referred to as the “interviewer” throughout the transcription. A selection of their responses is included below.

During the group interview, I asked the five participants if they had ever been told at school to stop speaking their L1 and to speak English only. Jorgen – “I haven’t because I’ve never spoken Finnish here.” Rhoda – “I’m same with him (Jorgen) but people at my table group when they speak our teacher use to say like don’t speak that because it’s not really fair to every student around you that can’t.” Ami – (Softly) “Ya.” Rhoda – “They (teachers and students) think it’s like a secret… like telling secrets or things like that, and they think oh well if you tell secrets it makes other people around you feel bad.”

I asked if they felt like their L1 was respected at school. There appeared to be mixed feelings amongst the group. Jorgen – “I don’t know. Not everybody knows that I speak Finnish.” Keung – “No. Because sometimes the Japanese don’t like the Chinese.” Ki Hong – “Lots of people said like if someone can speak another language and if he’s like acting rude to him then they say like you guys suck or like that.”

“...In a school environment where linguistic diversity is promoted as an asset rather than a problem, there are benefits for both monolinguals and bilinguals. Such an approach increases monolingual childrens’ knowledge about language. It also raises the status of bilingual children. Children will feel more confident and secure when their languages are valued and respected than when they are ignored or treated with contempt” (Edwards & Redfern, 1992, 6-7).

During the interview, I asked the students if they ever felt like they had been excluded from something because they did not speak English as well as their L1. Ki Hong- “No, but the first time I come here to Canada, my mom says sometimes you can speak with Korean but not everything. You have to play with American, Russian, or Chinese. And later my mom says maybe you can play with Korean sometimes.” Interviewer – “So your mom was telling you that sometimes you could play with students who were speaking the same language as you but she really wanted to make sure that you were with English-speaking students”? Ki Hong – nods his head and states, “Like it’s easier to learn it if you’re trying to speak it with other people.” Keung – (interrupts Ki Hong) “If your friends are speaking another language then you can like learn it.”

Identifying Language Use – (Student Survey Results ESL portion):

In addition to the regular portion of the Initial Student Survey, a few additional questions were devised for the ESL students only. When asked if they use their L1 at home, five students stated that their L1 was the only form of communication with their parents because
their parents were not proficient enough in English. Some of their comments included, “Because my mom don’t know English very well,” “Because my parents speak it better than English,” and “Because my mom can’t read what I’m writing, she don’t know English.” Three of the students expressed their concern with responses that included, “Because I don’t want to forget how to speak my home language.” The remaining students responded with a number of different reasons including, “My parents want us to get use to our own language.”

When asked if they used their L1 at school, quite a different set of responses became evident. Students who selected “Yes” made such statements as “I talk to my friends.” Of the five students who claim “Sometimes,” three of the students said it was because “Some of [their] friends spoke the same language” or because they liked to switch back and forth from English to their L1 with friends who could speak both languages. One student stated quite factually that he/she simply, “can communicate better.”

Half of the ESL students answered “No.” Five of the students stated that there was no one else at the school who spoke the same language as them or that they “Didn’t have any friends that spoke their language.” One student claimed that he does not use his L1 at school “Because I don’t really play with people that speak my language.” One student expressed the feeling that “It’s not fair to other kids who don’t speak my language.”

During the group interview, I asked the students whether they thought they should have more opportunities at school to use their L1. Rhoda – “Ya, because just like we have to practice English and like practice reading and stuff we should be able to practice reading in our home language and stuff too.” Interviewer – “What about writing in your school workbooks or Journals? Do you think the teachers should let you write in your home language in your Journals”? Jorgen – “Mmmm, no.” Rhoda – “Yes! But the problem with that is that some of us don’t know how to write it really well and it would take us longer and in twenty minutes we wouldn’t get as much done as other people doing it in English would get done so maybe the other kids would think it’s not fair because we wouldn’t look as if we did as much work. But that might not be true because if it’s taking us that long it’s because it means we are trying really hard.” Ami – “Well, what would happen if the teacher couldn’t speak it or read it”? Interviewer – “Like me, I can’t read Tagalog. What about you Ki Hong, I saw you shaking your head”? Ki Hong – “Ya I don’t think so, not really.” Keung – “Ya, I don’t think so because it’s Canada so you have to learn English.” Ki Hong – “English is one of the languages that every countries used, and later if you grow up and go to another country and work, you have to use English.”

One can draw a conclusion that at least for some of these students, their academic school life means focusing on the acquisition of English language skills at any cost, including risking the possible loss, in whole or in part, of the language they speak at home.

“Many people marvel at how quickly bilingual children seem to ‘pick up’ conversational skills in the majority language in the early years at school (although it takes much longer for them to catch up to native speakers in academic language skills). However, educators
are often much less aware about how quickly children can lose their ability to use their mother tongues, even in the home context. Children can lose their ability to communicate in their mother tongue within 2-3 years of starting school. By the time children become adolescents, the linguistic gap between parents and children has become an emotional chasm. In many cases, children no longer have a language in common with their parents and grandparents” (Cummins, 2006, 6).

The causes of language loss are numerous and complex, but most prominent among them is the power of English. “Its high social status makes it irresistible to younger generations. Conversely, the stigma of inferiority attached to minority tongues is often internalized by children who speak them… there is a strong pressure on these children to assimilate, combined with few opportunities to develop heritage languages in school and limited respect for such skills outside ethnic families and communities” (Crawford, 1999, 2-3).

Research Study Initiatives - (Speaking)

During the research project, students were assured that no attempt to prevent them from speaking in their L1 with other students in the class would be imposed upon them. At times, a student being allowed to communicate in his or her first/home language is a necessary and helpful aid in the early stages of learning English. Ki Hong clarifies this in the group interview by stating, “I’m not really good at English so I asking a friend who can speak English very well and Korean too and if I’m asking him with Korean then I can understand it better.”

There are 22 different languages spoken at the school, something that the students had not realized. During the group interview, the participants commented on the number of students in their class who spoke another language. Rhoda – “I didn’t know until we started this project and the teacher said that everybody who speaks another language come line up here (at the front of the classroom) so that I can right your names down…. A lot of people that lined up I had no idea that they spoke another language.” Ami – “Ya, ya, I didn’t know there were so many people in the class who spoke another language.”

I asked the interview group if they thought speaking their L1 at school was hindering or helping them to learn English at school. Ki Hong – “It’s better if there are some Korean because they can help.” Interviewer – “You think being able to speak Korean to other Korean speakers is helping you learn English better”? Ki Hong – “Ya sometimes.” Keung – “Ya, it’s better if there is Chinese people like in the school because if I don’t know then I can ask people in Chinese.”

At Thornwood Elementary, the intention for promoting the “open use” of languages other than English in the classroom was “to ensure that ESL students be made to feel a greater sense of belonging and emotional support and to develop a higher self-esteem…” (Chow and Cummins, 2003, 44). In addition, it also establishes with the ESL students that “their knowledge of additional languages was a resource to be shared rather than an impediment to be overcome” (Chow and Cummins, 2003, 52).

Research Study Initiatives - (Writing)

In addition to promoting conversation in other languages in the classroom, students were also encouraged to write in their journals in their L1. Two students in my grade 1 class, Chung Kee and Dae Kwan (labelled as reception level ESL students in September), were encouraged to write their classroom journal entries in their first/home language of Korean. I would then ask them to describe as best as they could what they had written so that I could then scribe for them in English on their journal page. Occasionally, another student in the
class who was fluent in both Korean and English was enlisted to help with an explanation
of the translations. Bilingual students can be a great resource in assisting with written and
spoken translations in the classroom.

Coelho suggests that we as educators should “encourage beginners to write in their first
language. Students might, for example, write their first journal responses in their own
language or insert words in their own language when they do not know the English word
(Coelho, 2004, 190). Edwards seconds this notion by stating that, “children need the chance
to develop as writers in both their languages” (Edwards, 1995, 17).

One activity during the grade 1 and grade 5 “Buddy” lessons was the creation of student-
authored dual-language picture storybooks. Written and illustrated by the children, the
books included stories written in Korean-English, Cantonese-English, Mandarin-English,
Farsi-English, Spanish-Hebrew-English, Tagalog-English, Finnish-English, and Arabic-
English.

Research educators such as Coelho feel that we should, “encourage students to produce
dual-language assignments. This enables students who are proficient in languages other
than English to make important contributions, it emphasizes that all languages are a valid
means of communication, and it encourages students to continue to develop their first
language skills” (Coelho, 2004, 189).

Research Study Initiatives - (Reading)

Providing books in the classroom has always been an essential part of any teacher’s resource
collection. However, the average classroom contains books in only the majority-language
taught in the classroom – usually English - and school libraries often have a limited selection of
books in other languages. For example, the library at my school has thousands of books on the shelves, yet in its collection there are only 88 foreign-language books, and only eight of these are dual-language in that the English text
was included on the same or adjacent page with the L1 text. When the resources are not
available, very limited, or at the very least not promoted, then students are less likely to use
them.

Using my own personal funds, I supplemented my grade 1 classroom book collection with
several dual-language books. The majority of the books included Chinese/English or
Korean/English text but a few other languages, including Spanish, Japanese, and German
were also included. In addition, several computerized “Living Books” on CD-ROM were
made available for the classroom computers. However, all of these were available with only
an English/Spanish option, with the exception of one story (Just Grandma and Me) which
included English, Spanish, German, and French options.

Obtaining dual-language books or CD-ROMs is not always an easy matter as resources are
often limited. Dual-language books can be obtained from the Vancouver Public Library’s
Central Branch, through Kidsbooks or Sophia Books stores in Vancouver, or by purchasing
them online at www.mantralingua.com (located in the United Kingdom).

Research Study Initiatives - (Parent Readers)

Parents can play an important role in the school by reading to children in first/home
languages. Often, families will have their own personal collection of books at home in their
first/home language. For example, the parent group associated with the research participants was quite diversified, with as many as ten different languages other than English - including Korean (9), Mandarin (4), Cantonese (4), Hebrew (2), Tagalog (1), Finnish (1), Dutch (1), French (1), Arabic (1), and Farsi (1).

During the course of the research study, three “parent readings” were carried out. Stories were read in Chinese, Spanish, and Korean with the English text read either before or after the L1 reading. It was fascinating to witness all of the students so enamoured and so focused on the story during the readings. They sat quietly and listened to the story being read in a language that was only understood by a handful of students. During the Mandarin story, a few students’ eyes lit up upon hearing the story being read in their own first/home language. I found similar results during the Korean reading. During the Spanish reading of the popular book, *When Suddenly!* many of the students remarked that they thought the words sounded “cool.” Yet only one student in the group of 50 was fluent in Spanish.

However, many students who speak a language other than English are not always encouraged to practice their L1 even at home. Often the parents of ESL children are so eager for their child to learn English as quickly as possible that they see no reason for the child to spend time practicing their first/home language. I have often heard comments such as, “I want my child to have English friends so that he/she can learn English faster.” In one instance, I had a parent request that her child’s seating location be changed. She was concerned that he was likely to spend time socializing with two students who spoke the same first/home language. She wanted her child to focus strictly on speaking only English rather than the possibility that he might inadvertently practice his Korean skills.

In being faced with parent responses such as the one mentioned above, one has to ask, if school-owned, non-English resources were made readily available, would parents make use of them? In response to one of the questions on the Parent Questionnaire, nearly 70% of parents indicated that if L1 materials, such as tape-recorded stories, were made available and sent home with students then they would make use of them.

Q12 Would you be interested in hearing tape-recorded stories in other languages with your child/children?

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Exit Survey:

At the conclusion of my action research, I administered a Student Exit Survey to determine subjectively if there were any noticeable changes in student attitude toward the use of languages in addition to English. Specifically, I wanted to judge if the status of ESL students was enhanced through factors of “pride.” I asked the students if they thought that languages other than English were respected more in the classroom since they had started the “Buddy” activities that involved the “open use” of first/home languages.

Q1. Do you think that languages other than English are respected more in your classroom since we did the buddy-activities (dual-language books)? Answer choices: “More,” “About the Same,” and “Less.”

A number of students selected a response of “About the Same.” However, five ESL students perceived more of a positive change. I therefore conclude that even with only 40 minutes a week of activities, which include the “open-use” of first/home languages, that this greater amount of exposure to languages in the classroom provided a greater sense of “pride” in the ESL students ability to speak another language. These students showed greater confidence and felt more secure when they had a sense that their languages were being valued and respected rather than ignored or regarded with contempt. By providing an opportunity to promote diversity (albeit even for a short period) these students were able to participate as leaders in activities.

The ESL students in the class were given additional questions on the Exit Survey, which included asking them to judge their level of pride in their L1 since the start of the research activities:

Q2. (ESL only) Do you feel more of a sense of pride at being able to speak another language since we did the activities where you could use your first/home language? Answer choices: “Yes More,” “About the Same,” and “No Less.”

Six of the students felt a sense of having more pride in their ability to speak another language, nine of the students felt about the same sense of pride, and two of the students felt less of a sense of pride in their dual-language ability. However, why they felt this way was not delved into and would require further investigation.

Issues of Social Justice:
Due to the high social status attributed to English and French in Canada as our “official” languages, there appears to be limited respect in public schools (especially at the elementary school level) for linguistic skills and even fewer opportunities to develop non-English and non-French language skills. With some notable exceptions where language courses are available to students in languages other than French and English, one has to ask, what exactly are we doing to ensure that ESL students feel a greater sense of belonging? What are we doing to give ESL students a sense of pride in their linguistic abilities? What messages of respect towards other languages are we sending? And therefore, what efforts are we making to help ESL students develop higher self-esteem, if we clearly send a message that their existing linguistic skills are nothing more than an impediment to overcome? Should we not as educators emphasize that all languages are a valid means to communicate, and encourage students to continue developing their first-language skills?

So, how should our schools go about delivering an appropriate model for ESL students to attain English language acquisition without loss to their own first/home language linguistic skills? How does one develop a classroom program and/or instructional model that would enhance the status of ESL students rather than marginalizing them to a state of deficiency?

The Cultural Celebration Charade:

“Many teachers conceptualize multiculturalism as celebratory and time specific; an innovation that generates information about different cultures, their holidays and festivals, as an activity that enhances sensitivity to other cultures” (Solomon, 69). Others point out that this way of thinking is nothing more than a pitfall that needs to be avoided, that such conceptions and practice are nothing more than, “superficial, tokenistic, and dated” (Solomon, 69). Furthermore, that this time-honoured charade of cultural celebrations now popular within schools, which at best may develop a superficial knowledge of culture, does not alter majority/minority group power relations in the classroom, community or society at large. At worst, critics argue that such reduction of culture to a tag for ethnic identity may further trap and maintain minorities in a marginal state of ‘otherness,’ disempowered, and outside the cultural mainstream (Solomon, 72).

Pull-Out & Quick-Exit Programs vs. Sheltered & Two-Way Bilingual Immersion:

The current “pull-out” ESL model, where resource teachers take students out of the mainstream classroom for 40-minute blocks of time, is currently the most commonly used model found in Vancouver’s public schools. In a “sink-or-swim” situation, where English acquisition is based on “time on task” theory, this particular model of instruction is considered by many researchers to be far from adequate. “To succeed in school [with this model of service] ESL students must master academic knowledge and skills at the same time they are acquiring a second language. This is not an easy task” (Crawford, 2004, 2). Those who agree refer to this type of ESL model as primarily “dedicated to reducing bilinguals to monolinguals” (Cummins, (b), 2).

Another model often discredited by researchers is the quick-exit transitional programs, which tend to see the students’ L1 as simply a temporary bridge to English. Therefore, this model does little to aspire to bilingualism and biliteracy. ESL students are placed in a separate class and taught through an immersion “time-on-task” method, where the theory is: the more time spent on learning English through intensive immersion, the quicker the acquisition of English skills. Students are typically placed into this type of program for one year and then integrated into the mainstream classroom the following school year. Researchers argue that, “culturally-diverse students are defined as deficient and confined to remedial programs that frequently act to produce the deficits they were ostensibly intended to reverse” (Cummins, (b), 16).
Research has shown that instructional models conducted over longer periods (i.e. five years), with at least a partial recognition of students’ first/home languages, assists English learners to meet with greater success. For example, a sheltered program can be considered a bilingual program in that it offers ESL instruction, sheltered subject matter teaching, and instruction in the first language. Non-English-speaking children initially receive core instruction in the primary language along with ESL instruction. As children grow more proficient in English, they learn subjects using more contextualized language (e.g., math and science) in sheltered classes taught in English, and eventually in mainstream classes. In this way, the sheltered classes function as a bridge between instruction in the first language and the mainstream environment (Krashen, 1997, 1).

“Bilingual education programs that emphasize a gradual transition to English and offer native-language (L1) instruction in declining amounts over time provide continuity in children’s cognitive growth and lay a foundation for academic success in the second language. By contrast, English-only approaches and quick-exit bilingual programs can interrupt that growth at a crucial stage, with negative effects on achievement” (Crawford, 1998, 3).

Programs that include developing children’s native-language skills show beneficial effects on their English-language development and overall academic achievement (Crawford 1998/99, 1-2). Dual-language or two-way bilingual immersion programs aim to “develop bilingualism and biliteracy among both language minority and language majority students. Most of these programs use between 90 percent and 50 percent minority language instruction in the early grades with instructional time equally split in the later elementary grades” (Cummins, (b), 3). “Dual language education is particularly appealing because it not only enhances the prestige of the minority language but also offers a rich opportunity for expanding genuine bilingualism to the majority population. Such programs are considered to be the best possible vehicles for integration of language minority students, since these students are grouped with English-speakers for natural and equal exchange of skills” (Cummins, (b), 8). Furthermore, “if there were adverse consequences associated with bilingual instruction, there would hardly be more than 300,000 English-background students in various forms of French-English bilingual programs in Canada” (Cummins, 1999, 2).

James Crawford points out that the cost savings related to dual-language programs is significant, in that the incremental costs compared to an ESL “pullout” program is considerably lower (nearly six times less). The reason is simple: the pullout approach requires supplemental teachers, whereas in-class approaches do not. However, he also states that, “Where children speak a number of different languages, rarely are there sufficient numbers of each language group to make bilingual instruction practical for everyone. In any case, the shortage of qualified teachers usually makes it impossible” (Crawford, 1998, 3).

A large-scale review of the factors, which predict the educational success in English of bilingual children in the United States and Canada, confirms the importance of children having the opportunity for cognitive development in their first language. The review reports that children who have the benefit of academic development in two languages reach parity of achievement in the second language with their monolingual peers at around the age of 11 or 12, and then proceed to outstrip them (Sneddon, 2000, 105).

**Conclusion:**

When I think of my own educational training to become a mainstream teacher, the foundation that was required in the courses I took at university did not include any formal
training in ESL. Unfortunately, it appears that is still largely the case today. The majority of university pre-service teacher education programs continue to follow a policy of consigning ESL issues to the status of an “additional qualification.” Cummins states that, because “issues related to teaching ESL students are rarely addressed in teacher education programs or in professional development for ‘mainstream’ teachers, the quality of support is likely to depend on the expertise that teachers have ‘picked-up’ on the job” (Cummins, 2006, 6).

Post Script:

As I walk down the hallways I overhear one student saying, “Nee how” to another and then a third student joining in with a response of, “In my language you say Koh-nee-chee-wah.” There are more languages than ever spoken at the school this year. There is even new language to use for referring to students who are entering the school system without English fluency. No longer are they referred to as English as a Second Language (ESL) learners but rather the ordinal reference is replaced with the newest politically correct term, English as an Additional Language (EAL).

By participating in action research within my own classroom, I have learned that it is our ethical responsibility to be proactive advocates for childrens’ linguistic rights. Promoting cultural diversity and the “open use” of multilingualism in the classroom through dual-language books, parent readers, first/home language writing, listening centres with books recorded in multiple languages, and other similar activities, can be a worthwhile and positive experience for both the classroom teacher and all of the students in the classroom, both ESL and monolingual alike.

I look upon my new grade 1 class for the 2007-2008 school year and take note of the fact that out of the 24 students in the class, nine languages other than English are spoken - Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Malay, Portuguese, Farsi, Thai, Urdu, Greek, and Serbian. Moreover, I wonder if during their school experience whether the linguistic resources of these children be recognized as valuable assets or if will it go largely unnoticed by most of their teachers? Will these students maintain their first/home language skills and therefore outstrip the English-only speaking children in academic standards? Will they become the much sought after bilingual work force needed to succeed in the present and future global economy, or alternatively, will they themselves be reduced to monolinguals as a consequence of the hidden agenda of our current school policy? In the end, if research shows that the “top” performing students are bilingual and not monolingual then is it not our job as educators to encourage and produce the best and brightest young graduates while promoting and maintaining cultural diversity and multilingualism in schools?

As educators, we must ask ourselves, “Are we preparing students to accept the societal status quo (and, in many cases, their own inferior status therein) or are we preparing them to participate actively and critically in the democratic process that is in pursuit of the ideals of social justices and equity which are enshrined in the constitution of most democratic countries?” (Cummins, (c) 16). Sometimes as educators, we blindly accept the educational policies placed before us without stopping to question them. “We assume that what is good for the imagined ‘generic’ white, monolingual, monocultural, middle-class student is good for all students. Perhaps we assume too much” (Cummins, 2006, 7).

References:


**About the Author**

Christopher Castellarin grew up on the West side of Vancouver, the son of two teachers (one being an Italian immigrant who never spoke Italian around his children). Chris became the epitome of the generic white, middle-class, monolingual (English only), monocultural teacher with no formal ESL training or experience. He has been an elementary public school teacher for 14 years with the Vancouver School Board, as well as in Melbourne, Australia, and has taught classes ranging from grades one to five. More recently, he has filled the role of Acting Vice Principal for two schools. He has witnessed many of the ESL children “sink or swim” their way through his class and the public school system with little idea that their educational experience could be better—until now.