Looking through the crystal: Considering various perspectives on an immersion program in Honduras

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Abstract: While immersion research is a well-established field, few studies have been conducted on immersion programs in Central America. This paper considers the perspectives of students, teachers, and the researcher on the teaching and learning of English in an immersion program in Honduras. Research in bilingual education has identified the importance of including the perspective of both students (Hamacher, 2007) and researchers (Schulz, 1996). Through the use of Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2008) model of crystallization, these perspectives were considered in order to further illuminate aspects of the teaching and learning of English at The Pines Bilingual School in Honduras. As part of a larger study, data were collected through written reflections, focus group and individual interviews, classroom observations, and a research log. An inductive analysis revealed two complementary themes: students’ language use inside of the classroom and students’ language use outside of the classroom. The perspectives on each theme were compared to relevant research in the field of immersion education and then key implications for practice were explored.

Keywords: second language education, English-language education, immersion programs

This paper employs Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2008) model of crystallization in consideration of different aspects of the teaching and learning of English in an immersion program in Honduras. Richardson and St. Pierre describe the consideration of participants’ different perspectives as similar to gazing through a prism; your view changes greatly depending on your perspective. From various viewpoints, you see different colours and patterns, and the reflected light casts diverse patterns in various directions. For this study, this metaphor was important as I explored the different perspectives of the groups of participants. Seemingly contradictory perspectives were not dismissed, but instead were embraced as providing new insights into the teaching and learning of English.
Researchers in bilingual education have emphasized the importance of including various perspectives. This paper considers the perspectives of students, teachers, and the researcher regarding aspects of teaching and learning English in the immersion program at The Pines Bilingual School (TPBS). First, the viewpoint of students was important, as a link has been established between students’ perceptions of the process of teaching and learning English and their rates of second-language acquisition (Hamacher, 2007). This study also considered the principles of student-centered research, which emphasizes the importance of allowing students’ voices to be heard on the issues that concern them (Clark, 2010). Studies in second language acquisition have also identified a gap between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of teaching and learning English (Schulz, 1996). Therefore teachers’ viewpoints on their experience of teaching English were also essential. Finally, as I was a member of this school community for seven years prior to this study, my perspective as a researcher was essential. My close ties to the community meant it was important to practice reflexivity. By including my perspective as the researcher, I considered how my viewpoint impacted the research, from research purpose, to the interview questions, to the codes I assigned. Each of the three perspectives provided different insights into the phenomenon of teaching and learning English.

Context

While a great deal of research exists on immersion programs, few studies have been conducted on programs in Central America, even though there are an increasing number of these types of programs in operation. In Honduras alone, there were 824 bilingual schools (Secretaria, 2011), many of which operated as immersion programs. In the study of second language acquisition, context matters greatly as the application of one model of bilingual education will not necessarily be successful in a new context without adapting it to the needs of the local student population (de Mejía, 2002). It was important therefore to explore the context of TPBS in order to address this gap in immersion research.

TPBS is a private Spanish-English school with approximately 250 students from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 11. The school was started in 1990 by a group of local parents in response to concerns about the public education system in Honduras. In the 2014-2015 school year, approximately 99% of students at TPBS spoke Spanish as their first language (L1) and English as their second language (L2). The students at TPBS came from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, ranging from some of the wealthiest families in the
city to students who received bursaries based on financial need. The majority of students lived within the city, while some travelled up to an hour from rural areas.

In the 2014-2015 school year, there were eight full-time and three part-time English teachers from Canada, the United States, and Honduras. The English teachers’ educational backgrounds ranged from the completion of high school to a Master in Education. Five of the eleven educators were certified teachers. Of the certified teachers, two had full-time teaching experience prior to beginning at TPBS. None of the teachers had formal training in teaching English as a second language (ESL), immersion education, or bilingual education. Of the eleven teachers, two had taught at TPBS for one year previously, while the other nine were in their first year teaching at the school.

The TPBS program followed an early partial immersion model, beginning in Junior Kindergarten with approximately 50% of classes taught in Spanish and 50% of classes in English. The language policy at TPBS states all English teachers should speak in English at all times with the students. In the earliest grades, students were encouraged by their teachers to speak as much English as possible. In the upper grades, students were expected to speak in English at all times during their English classes.

**Method**

**Student Reflections**

This paper considers three different perspectives on aspects of teaching and learning English in TPBS’ immersion program. In order to consider these varied perspectives, data was collected from each set of participants. First, students in Kindergarten to Grade 11 (n=239) completed personal written reflections. The student reflection activity took place during a regular English class with each grade from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 11 and lasted approximately 40 minutes. Students were provided with a reflection prompt asking them to describe their experience learning English. A research assistant and I explained to the students that they could respond to the prompt through writing or drawing. If they wrote, they were welcome to use either English or Spanish to express themselves. The instructions, as well as the actual prompts, were provided to students in both English and Spanish. The research assistant and I were available to answer any questions about the task or to provide a needed translation or spelling of a word. We did not prompt students on the content of their responses, but instead answered their specific questions to help them communicate their ideas.
Student Interviews

I used the student reflections to select participants for the student focus group interviews ($n=28$), according to the following criterion: (a) a student who had attended TPBS for at least one full academic year; (b) a variation of positive and negative learning experiences; (c) a combination of English and Spanish responses to represent preferences for each language used; (d) those who identified specific stories or examples that influenced their experience; and (e) a balance of males and females, reflecting each grade’s gender demographics. I selected six to eight students for each of the following four groups: Grades 3-4, 5-6, 7-9, and 10-11, for a total of 28 students. Each group participated in a set of two focus group interviews each. The 40-minute interviews took place one to two weeks apart. The focus group interviews were structured around a two-part discussion guide which contained both individual questions to explore learner characteristics, as well as questions regarding program characteristics and learning process variables (i.e., integration of content and language, language of instruction, the use of best practices, and experiential and analytical approaches to language teaching).

The questions built upon the most salient points from the student reflections. This allowed for questions related to the students’ experiences to be addressed to ensure student engagement with the topic (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010). The prepared questions were considered as a general guide and not a set of structured questions to be uniformly addressed. While the interview guide was prepared in English, the questions and discussions occurred in both Spanish and English. A bilingual research assistant helped with the focus groups for Grades 3-4 and 5-6. I explained to the students that regardless of the language used for the questions, they were welcome to respond in Spanish or in English or a mix of the two languages.

Teacher Interviews

The perspectives of teachers ($n=9$) were gathered through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews. These interviews were led by an interview guide, which focused upon program characteristics, teacher characteristics, and teaching process variables. The one-hour interviews were conducted in English. Five teachers participated in the individual interviews and four teachers participated in the focus group interview. In both cases, teachers participated in two sets of interviews, each approximately one month apart. All individual and focus group interviews for both students and teachers were audio and video recorded in order to allow me to return to the original data to
ensure accuracy and avoid premature interpretation of the data based on my initial analysis (Walsh, Bakir, Lee, Chung & Chung, 2007).

**Researcher Observations**

Finally, I included my own perspective as the researcher through two main data sources. First, I kept a detailed research log where I recorded my perspectives on my various research tasks. Second, I conducted a total of eight classroom observations, divided evenly between one elementary and one secondary teacher. The classroom observations focused on how the teaching and learning of English occurred in the classroom, looking specifically for evidence of strategies related to teaching and learning process variables. My observation checklist guided these observations and was adapted from Fortune’s (2000) “Immersion Teaching Strategies Observation Checklist” with permission from the author.

Four 40-minute classroom observations were conducted in each of the teachers’ classrooms. The observations were audio and video recorded and I took detailed notes, guided by my checklist. I conducted my observations primarily as a passive observer, though on a few occasions I had an informal conversation with a student to clarify the nature of their assigned task or activity.

After collecting the data, I inductively analyzed the data by assigning codes and establishing themes as part of the overall study. As part of this process, I used aspects of the Constant Comparative Method (Boeije, 2002), which calls for a multitude of comparisons of data, first within an individual data source and then between sources with a similar experience, and then between sources with different experiences. Teacher and student data sets were examined and compared within each set before teacher and student data was compared. I then compared my own perspective to the teachers and students. The in-depth process of comparison allowed me to identify instances when perspectives were similar or divergent in regards to a specific finding. While the Constant Comparative Method refers to this final process of comparison between different perspectives as triangulation, I prefer the Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2008) metaphor of crystallization. They argue triangulation looks to confirm findings regarding a fixed point, while crystallization uses different perspectives to illuminate a topic.
Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data led to two major themes: 1) students’ language use inside of the classroom and 2) students’ language use outside of the classroom. In this section, three different perspectives on each theme will be presented, followed by a comparison of the perspectives to each other and also to relevant research in the field. Finally, implications for practice will be considered based on each finding.

Students’ Language Use Inside of the Classroom

The first theme that emerged from the study was the use of Spanish and English by students inside the English immersion classroom. Teachers and students believed students generally used Spanish when speaking to each other and English when speaking to their teacher. They also thought there was an increase in English language use in the older grades, though even in Grade 10 students primarily used Spanish in peer interactions.

While teachers and students agreed on the amount of Spanish and English used in the classroom, their perspectives differed on the reasons behind students’ language use. Teachers believed students were not motivated to learn English, and therefore they did not have a reason to practice their English, even in the English classroom. One teacher explained, “For getting them to speak English, I haven’t really found anything that works. Because some of them just don’t care and I can’t obviously make them care.”

In contrast, students indicated high levels of motivation to learn English. In the focus group interviews, 96% of students indicated they wanted to continue to study English and specified immediate and long term uses of English, such as translating for their family members and studying abroad. When asked, 43% of students stated they preferred to speak in English, while only 25% stated they preferred Spanish with the remaining 32% of students indicated a shared preference for both languages. When given the opportunity to complete a written reflection in either Spanish or English, 56% of students chose English, 35% chose Spanish and 9% used both languages.

When asked about their language use in the English classroom, students shared a number of reasons why they chose to speak in Spanish, including: fear of their classmates making fun of them, lack of confidence in speaking English, and awkwardness with speaking English to other Spanish-speakers. One Grade 4 student explained, “Maybe because they are afraid that they don’t know a word and… and they don’t say it… good and the classmates will laugh.” While teachers believed students’ language use was
primarily tied to their motivation, students noted a variety of other limiting factors. In summary, teachers and students shared very divergent opinions on the factors behind students’ language choice in the English classroom.

Students’ reticence to use English in their classroom has been noted in other studies. At Academia Los Pinares (ALP), an international school in Honduras, Hooley (2005) notes upper high school students were not completely comfortable conversing in the classroom in English. Hooley claims their hesitation is not a reflection of a cultural social norm, as Honduran students are very expressive and verbal within the classroom while speaking Spanish. While ALP would be considered an international school, and does not necessarily follow all components of an immersion program, it seems to share similar patterns of student language use in the English classroom as noted by this study.

Spezzini (2005) conducted a study in an English immersion school in Paraguay to explore patterns of language use by students. She explains students primarily used Spanish with their classmates, though they did use English for other purposes, such as for reading and writing. In interviews with Grade 12 students, they indicated the school could do little to encourage them to speak English. School officials believed it was not possible to counteract the strong influence of students not wanting to speak English to their Spanish-speaking peers. This finding aligns well with the comments made by students at TPBS regarding their reticence to speak English in the classroom.

MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2002) explored the relationship between motivation and willingness to communicate through a quantitative investigation of Grade 7, 8, and 9 students in a late French Immersion junior high school in Nova Scotia. They defined willingness to communicate as a personality-based predisposition that included aspects such as language anxiety and perceived competence. They found students’ willingness and frequency of communication in French (L2) increased from Grades 7 to 9 as well as increased willingness to use French as their French language competence grew, though they still spoke primarily in English. Students, teachers, and researchers also noted the increased use of a second language by more senior students at TPBS. However, students still noted a preference for speaking in Spanish in the English classroom, as was noted in other studies. These others studies confirm that the use of L2 in the immersion classroom can be influenced by a variety of factors and cannot be simply accredited to students’ motivation or perceived lack thereof to learn the language.

As the researcher, my classroom observations generally confirmed the language use patterns described by teachers and students, yet I also noted students were provided with minimal opportunities to speak in English. Instead, students spent much of their
class time listening to their teacher speak or completing individual tasks. These observations have also been noted in similar studies that showed students in immersion programs are often provided with fewer opportunities to use language than in L1 classrooms (Genesee 1994; Ramirez, 1986). This finding is important, as immersion students have typically struggled with their productive skills (Swain, 2005). Immersion students need more opportunities to speak in the target language to achieve L2 proficiency (Fortune, 2000; Genesee, 1994).

These findings present key implications for practise for TPBS. First, there was a lack of communication between teachers and students regarding the reasons behind students’ language use in the classroom. This lack of communication led to the assumption that students were not motivated to learn English. In order to address this breakdown in communication, TPBS could implement clearer lines of communication between teachers and students, in which teachers provide students with frequent and varied opportunities to express their opinions on their own learning. Second, teachers should consider how to increase student output in the target language. Currently, students receive limited opportunities for productive language use, which is a weakness noted in other immersion programs. Students require increased opportunities to produce English to increase their confidence and their proficiency.

Students’ Language Use Outside of the Classroom

The second finding that emerged was the students’ use of English outside of the classroom. In both the focus group interviews and written reflections, students cited out-of-classroom activities as a major contributing factor to their learning of English. 96% of students indicated they used English outside of school. 96% of students indicated that they had at least one family member that spoke English and others spoke regularly to English-speaking friends. Students as young as Grade 6 mentioned that they translated for family members or foreigners visiting Honduras and 67% of students indicated they used English to access a variety of media forms and technologies, such as music, video games, Facebook, websites, television programs, movies (including foreign films with English sub-titles), and cell phone and computer interfaces. When asked in their reflections what supported their learning of English, one student stated, “So learning English has been easy, because reading and talking to North-American people has helped me. Also, watching English TV shows... also listening to music in English has made it easy.” Students at various grade levels indicated out-of-school opportunities as instrumental in their English language development.
While students emphasized their use of English outside of school, they saw little connection between their language use and their English classrooms. Students called for a stronger focus on the more practical uses of English in their classes such as translating, technology and letter writing. Other students believed they needed more opportunities to practice with English-speakers outside of school, explaining: “I say we need to practice more like talking with other people...In here we talk with a English teacher we feel like normal, but when we go outside or another place we feel like scared.” While students used English regularly outside of school and felt this contributed strongly to their language development, they generally saw few connections between their out-of-school uses and their English classes.

While students emphasized the role of English outside of the classroom, most teachers believed students had very limited opportunities to use English in their daily lives. When asked about connections between English class and the outside world, teachers noted that they had not considered this connection before. One teacher explained,

I think the students are right. There wasn’t a whole lot of opportunity to have meaningful use of the language. When we did, like we would have if someone came and visited or something and they would talk that would be helpful or we would watch movies in English class... In science I had them teach the younger grades the concepts... but I think it was still pretty forced because really they could have communicated more effectively in Spanish so that I don’t think would even be a good example. Yeah, it was very limited, in terms of real world application.

My classroom observations confirmed teachers’ comments, as there was very little evidence of connections between the English classroom and students’ use of English outside of school.

While teachers did not describe strong connections between students’ use of English outside of school and within the classroom, immersion research supports the students’ perspective, arguing these opportunities form an essential component of students’ growth. Immersion students require frequent opportunities for the meaningful and extended use of L2 for a variety of purposes (Day and Shapson, 2001; Genesee, 1994). Without these opportunities, students can develop a narrow type of academic-only language (Abello-Contesse, Chandler, López-Jiménez, & Chacón-Beltrán, 2013). In order to include further opportunities for meaningful language use, teachers could ask students to describe their language needs outside of the classroom and look for opportunities to
incorporate these needs in their classroom activities. As well, teachers could include further components of technology, one of the key areas identified by students for English-use in their daily lives. Through understanding more about students’ use of English outside of the classroom, and incorporating meaningful language opportunities within the classroom, teachers would provide students with a clearer purpose behind classroom learning and support students’ English acquisition.

**Conclusion**

This paper considered the perspectives of students, teachers, and the researcher on the teaching and learning of English in an immersion program in Honduras. Context has been identified as an important consideration in bilingual education, yet minimal research has been conducted on immersion programs in Central America, and virtually none on programs in Honduras. This paper also addresses the call of other bilingual researchers to include a variety of perspectives. These perspectives were considered through Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2008) model of crystallization, which values congruent and seemingly conflicting perspectives as providing important insight. This study demonstrated how teachers, students and the researcher often interpreted the same practices in different ways. This finding strengthens the rationale for ongoing research that asks both teachers and students for their thoughts on their learning and teaching in immersion programs. Immersion education is an important and growing phenomenon in Honduras, yet this context has not been explored in research. This study begins to address a crucial research gap, but the continued examination of different perspectives within a variety of immersion contexts remains a central issue for years to come.
References


