

Cognitive support or social prestige: The use of English L1 in immersion

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In school-based additive bilingual programs, competition between target languages for time and status inevitably leads to the habitual use of one language over the other—with the language of prestige being the categorical winner. In spite of this, in language immersion programs where English is the majority language and one of two languages of instruction along with a minority language such as French, Spanish, or Mandarin, there have been calls for students to draw more freely on the language they know best for cognitive support. Understandably, such calls are inspired by the positive results of research confirming the many benefits of L1 use by minority-language students. However, the benefits of English L1 use by majority-language students have not been adequately substantiated by research to justify more use of English than is already the case in immersion programs.

Accordingly, this talk will question the generalizability across all instructional settings of translanguaging practices that come into play in social interaction between bilinguals as they make use of their shared linguistic resources. Specifically, an argument will be made against more use of English in Canadian and US immersion programs targeting minority languages such as French or Spanish: Both in one-way immersion, where more use of the majority language has been associated with plateau effects in minority language development, and in two-way immersion programs, where more English in the curriculum has not proven to further enhance the English language proficiency of minority-language students. Arguably, in both cases, more use of English serves to reinforce the societal language imbalance that favours majority-language use.

Given the absence of research demonstrating that more use of the majority language results in higher levels of proficiency in the minority language, this talk will address two main questions regarding immersion programs. First, what instructional strategies are more likely than use of the majority language to scaffold both content learning and continued development in the minority language? Second, because immersion students still need to make strong connections between both languages of instruction for the purpose of biliteracy development, how can teachers implement crosslinguistic pedagogy as a means for students to benefit from the dynamic relationship between the two languages while developing a sense of contextual integrity for each language on its own?