

Bilingual Learning and its Effects on Students' Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The study looks into the important issues concerning the development of bilingual learning of the third-grade bilingual students in the Thai context. The research sample consists of 67 primary students at third grade from three classrooms and their six Thai teachers (three Thai teachers and three native English speaking teachers). The data are collected through classroom observations and semi-structured in-depth interview with the teachers. This study is based on an interpretive approach concerned with subjective meaning in a particular context with the collected data analysed inductively. The study reveals that the students can manage to communicate well in English. They have been exposed to considerable amount of language from which they learned much more than grammar rules. Their main social task is to acquire communicative competence. The role of the environment has become more meaningful for the students' communicative ability. Overall, the bilingual education results in satisfying English proficiency and academic performance while the students' proficiency in their native language has been further developing. The results of this study help to advance the debate surrounding the effectiveness of a bilingual learning programme suggesting that a bilingual learning programme provides an effective instructional approach for elementary bilingual students.

Keywords: *development of bilingual learning, communicative competence, effective bilingual learning*

Introduction and contextual background

In Thailand, Thai-English bilingualism has been flourished throughout the country. From the study on Thai-English bilingual children (Suwanarak, 2013), it is apparent that the education of bilingual children is dependent on the degree to which the children have access to instruction that is challenging, but comprehensible. They need an accepting institute and social environment which promotes academic achievement and values communicative competence of both Thai and English languages as well as cultural and language diversity.

Research aims and questions

This study looks into the important issues concerning the development of communicative competence of Thai-English bilingual children in Thailand where English currently has great additive value and investigates the effects of bilingual learning from the view of the teachers who are in the process of bilingual education. The implications for teaching approaches and the implementation of comprehensive bilingual programs are also focused. With this regard, two research questions are then developed: 1) To what extent do the Thai-English bilingual students in a bilingual learning program achieve communicative competence?; and 2) What are the effects of bilingual education on the students' learning achievement?

Theoretical framework

From the constructivist's viewpoint, individual perceptions are derived from the way each individual perceives, understands and interprets the world, depending on the culture from which he or she originates (Coleman, 1996). On the subject of this present study, the views of teacher participants certainly correspond to their cultural grounding and practices. At some stage in the data collection procedure, for example, the teachers mentioned cultural influences on bilingual learning on the Thai-English bilingual children and the development of their communicative competence. To some extent, the cultural aspect in the teaching and learning environment may have some influence on the participants' views.

Literature review

Aspects of bilingual language development

According to Volterra and Taeschner (1978), the early stage of developing bilingual children is basically monolingual. The important concern is whether the two languages of bilingual children develop autonomously or interdependently. With this regard, interdependent development would be a consequence of systematic influence of

one language on the development of the other, resulting in patterns or rates of development that differ from what would be expected in monolingual children.

These theoretical and practical concerns have resulted in research that compares the development of bilingual children to that of monolingual children acquiring the same languages. On the other hand, this may be an inappropriate frame of reference because it stigmatises bilingual patterns of development and risks attributing differences that bilingual children exhibit to deficits in children's ability to acquire two languages at the same time (Cook, 2002). Alternatively, the linguistic competencies of bilingual children, like those of bilingual adults, should be examined and evaluated on their own advantages (Grosjean, 1997). Such comparisons are prevalent in experimental research; consequently, this can have important real world implications.

Communicative competence in second language

Communicative competence has been somewhat neglected in EFL literature probably because of its intangibility and intrinsic difficulty in labeling it. Widdowson (2002) defines communicative competence as an unstable concept that is simply understood as the ability to produce spoken utterances which are marked for illocutionary function. Nevertheless, he specifically argues that no syllabus can produce communicative competence. The responsibility, therefore, lies on the teacher who will be in charge of putting this communicative syllabus into practice.

Communicative competence includes what Chomsky had defined as *linguistic competence* as well as the rules of language in context that are analysed under the heading of pragmatics, attitudes, values and motivations that are usually left out when discussing a language (Cited in Skehan, 2003). One of the main components of an individual's communicative competence is a set of conceptual structures or schema to face and handle different kinds of problems that entail a variety of linguistic resources, such as asking for things, complaining, answering negatively and others which are equally complex.

Communicative competence in a second language could be based in the schema that children bring from their first language, though the first and second languages differ to a great extent in their grammatical and lexical realisation. It is then the role of teachers to build on this already acquired competence. If teachers ask the right questions, they also may help their children to develop their communicative and thinking skills. As well, a preference for references rather than display questions will promote communicative competence.

Effects of bilingualism

There have been some disputes among researchers on the effects of bilingualism and various studies show divergent results. Many studies (e.g., Federman, 2000; Lopez, 2003; Mora, 2000) find insignificant or negative effects of bilingual programs on labour-market outcomes such as educational attainment and earnings whereas a lot more research on the relationship between learning a second language early in life and cognitive ability reveals more positive effects whereas other studies. Bialystok (1986), for example, indicates that children's bilingualism positively affects their increasing ability to solve problems involving high levels of control of linguistic processing.

Considering the effect of bilingual education on academic achievement, Gordon and Hoxby (2002) discover that there is positive effect of bilingual education on achievement in multiple subjects although these effects are concentrated in the earlier grades. Similarly, Green (1998) comes across a positive effect of bilingual education on academic achievement. As well, August and Shanahan (2006) obtain similar conclusions that students in bilingual education programs outperform other English learning. Likewise, Genesee et al. (2006) realise that there are positive associations between native-language instruction and various measures of English proficiency and academic achievement.

Diaz and Klinger (1991) indicates that the positive effects of bilingualism are connected to low levels of second language proficiency that a new threshold hypothesis is formulated. The effects of bilingualism on cognitive development are most likely mediated through the processes and experiences related to early stages of second language learning. Likewise, Robinson (1992) summarises in his study that children whose experience with two language systems seems to have let them with mental suppleness, dominance of concept information, and more diversified mental abilities. The children perform better on standardised tests and tests of basic skills in English math and social studies.

By and large, these previous studies show mixed effects of bilingual education on academic achievement. They use a host of techniques to control for the nonrandom placement of students into bilingual education. Their data sets are either aggregated to the grade level or contain English proficient students along with English learners. However, none of them considers the effect of bilingual education on English proficiency.

Research methodology

This qualitative research is based on an interpretive approach concerned with subjective meaning in a particular context. It takes into account that knowledge is flexible and depends on personal perspectives. There is not absolute reality situated in the context, but there are multiple realities which are multifaceted and complex (Radnor, 2002). Personal experience and understanding of qualitative researchers is an important part of the research inquiry. What the researchers can do, within the interpretive paradigm, is to examine and interpret situations through the views of participants.

Sampling

The study, focusing on its bilingual programme of study, was carried out in a private elementary school in Bangkok, Thailand. The adequate sample for the study was 67 primary students in three classrooms and their six teachers (three Thai teachers and three native English speaking teachers) which could accurately represent the population being targeted, satisfactorily produce meaningful findings and fully answer the research questions.

The teacher participants are bilingual school teachers teaching third-grade Thai students at the age of 7 and 8 studying in a bilingual private elementary school. The students have attended this bilingual programme for almost six years; all of them started bilingual education in kindergarten. In addition, socio-economic backgrounds of the students do not differ much from one another; their parents are well-educated and engaged in well-established businesses and public/private organisations.

Data collection methods

The data collection methods involve observations of students' interaction in three bilingual classrooms and individual interviews with their teachers. Through the observation, the researcher witnessed the students' communicative competence and possible effects of their bilingual learning. Consequently, the teachers were semi-structurally interviewed as the research aim is to get as closely as possible to their views on students' bilingual learning and its effects on students' communicative competence.

Data analysis

Qualitative data from the observation and interviews were analysed by using an interpretive approach. To increase validity with the data, a researcher in TESOL reviewed the transcriptions for data groupings and common themes that might have arisen and could answer the research questions.

Findings and discussion

Communicative competence of bilingual students

The students in the context of this study have Thai as a first language and attend a bilingual school, learning English as a second language, for its added social value. Through the classroom observation, it was apparent that the second language was developing and the first language was also in a developmental stage. English was somehow given to the students as a second language rather than skilled and developed; as a result, the students did not have a full understanding of the reach of using English proficiently.

A significant component in the development of communicative competence in this context is the use of what has been called *code-switching*. Apparently, all the teachers observed that when the students run short of vocabulary, they had various responses: keeping silent, speaking in a very soft voice, changing the course of the conversation, or asking for help with "How do you say ... in English?" or "What is it (in English)", alternate to body language or use their mother tongue. Nevertheless, they did not use it randomly; they either code-switched, code-mixed, or integrated. For example:

Teacher: *What's in the sky?*
Student 1: *Mek (cloud)*
Student 2: *Cloud*

From the above example, this usually happened in an English class; the teacher made a question and a student answered in Thai. The teacher pretended not to hear and the student repaired communication by using English.

Considering communicative competence in both Thai and English languages, the Thai teachers and the native English speaking teachers admitted that the bilingual students in this context were Thai dominant bilinguals. Although they were fluent and natural, their accuracy in English could not be considered high. Nevertheless, they chose to the request of lexis when unable to find the word they needed on their own. For example, they regularly used “*How do you say ... in English?*” or “*What’s ... called in English?*”. They were made entirely mindful of the distinction within the two systems from the start. They had notions of translation, fixed phrases, and autonomous skills in the target language (English) that did not correspond to their mother tongue (Thai): “*Can you say that again, please?*” or “*Shall we read it?*”. The Thai teachers also noted that the students could name concepts in English which were unknown to them in Thai, but which had been acquired in the target language. The most frequent cases observed had to do with labeling items, food and ecological matters.

Regarding their age of acquisition, the third-grade students were childhood consecutive bilingual. All of them had acquired Thai as their mother tongue before they truly started their English bilingual learning. Less affecting factors for the students would mark them as *additive, exogenous, and monocultural* bilinguals, considering social status, presence of L2 in the community, and group membership respectively. At school, when they used English as the target language, it was for the reason that there were audiences and authority. Therefore, a significant motivator must be a teacher. When they were getting older, this factor would gradually be lost and teachers would choose other means to ensure the use of the target language in class.

From the interview with all the teachers, communicative competence of the students was revealed. It was remarkable that the students had the same shortage of language for the explanation of the process applied when they had to give an explanation for a lexeme they were unlikely to handle. The teacher explained that, for example, one of the students seemed to have a greater ability to describe the process. He could talk about the elements used in a science laboratory. Only a word was missing and he alternated to the highly drilled: “*How do you call it ... in English? I don’t know it?*”. Not only his linguistic ability of the students was employed, their communicative notion of the code helped facilitate him to ask that question when he was in need. He knew he was entitled to it and he could ask that question to the teacher who supposedly knew English better than him.

One of the native English speaking teachers added that if he did not give an answer to a student and used a longer wait time period without losing eye-contact, the student might resume the conversation: “*Why do we need it?*” This simple notion showed a developed code of communication and indicated that the students were not aware of his/her lack of vocabulary, and through paralinguistic features, decided to bring the dialogue to a closing stage. Two other Thai teachers also mentioned how the students tried to produce a noticeable *topic change* (Coulhard, 1977) which was a late-acquired strategy, to avoid the conflict evidence of his linguistic problem.

Considering how communicative competence grew in the pre-linguistic period of the bilingual students, some aspects of communicative competence, particularly morphological and syntactic aspects, were developed simultaneously, but the order was remarkably altered. All the teachers agreed that the students needed to be encouraged by teachers. By means of constant interaction, observation, trial, and error, the students learned about the importance of turn-taking in the form of topic initiation, maintenance or change and the appropriate use of speech acts which would all lead to the development of coherence and cohesion in conversation.

One of the native English speaking teachers shared his experience of seeing how the students were recreating a short story he had read in class. They were not reading or memorising parts of the story, but were recreating it with their own utterances within their own reach, unique and adapted to the context. This appeared to be the first stages of meaningful communication at beginner level; the students made use of learned utterances which had been widely practiced and little combination was detected.

It was reported by one of the Thai teachers that the students abandoned the one-word stage and moved on rapidly to the two-word stage, which had its own analytical rule. Noticeably, the students already developed their bilingual learning and had a notion of noun phrases, as in the following examples:

Teacher: *What am I?*
 Student 1: *A teacher*
 Student 2: *An English teacher*

In accordance with this, Foster (1990) emphasised that it was easier for children to expand the object than the subject at the multi-word stage. As well, in the following examples, the teacher showed the students' comfort in the expansion of the subject:

"I like ... book of history and the cartoon books."
"I going to ... vacations and I see TV and ... playing"
"I'm the best speak English for learn and because I like speaking English."

As far as communicative competence was concerned, most of the students were able to hold a conversation, expand and justify their choice, use repair strategies by raising their voice and overstressing the preposition when they did not understand the given utterances.

The students also had a sense of texture and sequence in the story. The resources they used were not very sophisticated; however, *and* and *again* were observed as a sample of early cohesion. Another kind of consistent devices already developed was the use of *well* and *umm* or *urr* meant to fill the space of thinking time. The students resorted to well-rehearsed structures with basic structures of subject and verb. It was noticeable that they could develop and sustain their turn. The value of their exchanges relied on the successful use of lexical accuracy rather than on grammatical accuracy to complete the story. The teacher considered that the ability of telling a story was a skill that the students had already acquired in their mother tongue. For example:

"Well, picture one ... I see people and children look a elephant and and girl is taking. Picture two ... there is two elephants and urr children and girl. In picture three ... elephants have four legs and the tree. I see the elephant again in picture five and I see the children again."

Noticeable, turns in conversation between teachers and students were somewhat longer at this stage than earlier in their bilingual learning. The teacher remarked that the students could keep the topic and maintain the story all the way through. This was in line with Foster (1990) indicating that cohesion was achieved by devices that joining individual utterances together. The teacher could observe respect for turn-taking, no overlapping and a good command of cohesion. Nevertheless, understanding of many students of the inclusive pronoun was still imperfect.

The students also showed a usual linguistic skill like the framing for questions in the classroom. Another native English speaking teacher emphasised that the students did not feel intimidated to ask questions because they were used to being exposed to a dialogue pattern between teachers and class. Most of the students could solve the problem of using the framing of questions more quickly and had a sense of comfort with the language and the dialogue situation. They could imitate intonation of usual questions. For example:

Teacher: *Well, I'm saying something about an animal, and you have to guess. I've got a big body.*
 Student: *Are you an elephant?*
 Teacher: *No, I'm not.*
 Student: *Are you a bear?*
 Teacher: *No, I'm not.*
 Student: *How many legs you have?*
 Teacher: *No, I don't have legs. But I can swim.*
 Student: *Oh, I know! A ... whale ... Are you a whale?*
 Teacher: *Yes, I am.*

Regarding the communicative competence of the students in this context, the idea of linguistic accuracy prevailed. They could be guided into the ability to make themselves understood with the less number of mistakes. They could be guided into it if the teacher did not restrict the language used to a set of classroom phrases, if they were not

overloaded with grammatical or system-based explanations, and if they were allowed to use the language in activities that engaged them.

Obviously, all the teachers gave similar views that obstacles for the development of communicative competence were little exposure to the target language or a teacher who constantly interrupted the students' production for the sake of accuracy. The comfort of using English was usually fostered through the bilingual teaching. Being able to make use of the language, the students showed that they tried to create a sense of independence in classrooms. The language structures were shown on the wall to expose the students to everything the language could give them.

To conclude, any approach to the understanding of communicative competence development must consider the students' roles, the input and the relationship between the teacher and the student (Foster, 1990). The way the interaction between the communicative competence experienced by the student and the student's psychological make-up of the student plus the right environment administered by the teacher would design the model of communicative competence in the early years of bilingual education. Unlike the acquisition of a first language, the beginning of the second one would make use of resources of the native language to build the new one.

Pragmatic development, in addition, appeared to involve a major role for input, including explicit teaching. The students were already equipped with a set of pragmatic rules that they would in turn transfer to the second language. Understanding other people and situations was an existing part of their cognitive development; as a result, this enabled them to move comfortably in the sociolinguistic sphere of the new language. The students transferred the patterns of their first language, no matter how difficult they might be. In fact, it was the students' maturity that would allow them to expand what they wanted to say.

Hence, competence is unquestionably a combination of innate and acquired knowledge, the basis of English and the environment input provided by the teachers and the school. The teachers are supposed to set up the right knowledge and understanding for the creation of communicative competence because this discarded aspect of language relies more on the fostering than on the actual teaching of the notion. To some extent it is necessary to review needs in order to see whether the assessment tools are appropriate for the development of communicative skills. The significance of this growth will help the teachers construct their students' communicative competence with the aim at creating an independent speaker of English.

Effects of bilingual education on the students' learning achievement

From the researcher's observation and the teachers' views, the bilingual education results in satisfying English proficiency and academic performance while the students' proficiency in their native language has been further developing. Both native language (Thai) and second language (English) have been integrated from kindergarten through third grade. Percentage of time the students are exposed to Thai and English in the core subjects (i.e., Reading, Writing, Math, Social Studies, and Science) is 50/50 whereas the English subject is instructed by native English speaking teachers.

The teachers noticed that the bilingual learning programme may foster more direct attention to language use. As one of the teachers stated, "*Students are more aware of their different languages as they are encouraged to use both regularly.*" In accordance with this, Cromdal (1999) considered it as the intermixing of languages that may result in increasing metalinguistic knowledge correlated to bilingualism.

The improved performance of core subjects observed by the teachers may also be due in part to these students being taught academic concepts in their native language. In the earlier grades, the bilingual students had taken Math and Science classes mostly in their native and likely stronger language; this may have increased comprehension of the lessons and enabled the students to learn the material more effectively. All of the teachers had similar views on this and one of them clarified:

"A possible reason for the bilingual students' improved comprehension is that a bilingual learning programme may foster more direct attention to language use."

As well, in situations where concepts were taught in both English and Thai, memory for these concepts may be especially strong, as encoding in two different contexts may lead to deeper encoding and more retrieval routes. Thus,

bilingual education may affect performance in and out of the classroom in many ways, and teachers should understand these effects (Genesee et al., 2006).

All of the teachers were well aware that making bilingual education more extensively accessible entailed current development setbacks. Participation during early elementary school years positively shaped achievement. According to Hakuta et al. (2000), it could take four to seven years to develop enough proficiency for successful academic performance. Some students may not have enough English-language proficiency in the early grades to perform successfully on the English-based learning and tests, thereby delaying the benefits in their academic achievement. The effect of early bilingual education involvement was related to the fact that the students were likely to learn the most fundamental reading, writing, and comprehension skills. If they enter later elementary grades without such skills, potential positive effects of later bilingual education would be diminished (Collier and Thomas, 2004).

The teacher participants accepted that either success or failure of bilingual students may well to some extent agreed on the strength of both native and second language supports and how skillful the teachers were at integrating both languages for facilitating academic success of the students. Research evident (e.g., Cheng, 1996; Gordon and Hoxby, 2002; Lindholm-Leary and Howard, 2008; Mora, 2000; Slavin and Cheung, 2003; Suwanarak, 2013) appears to support academic and social advantages of the primary language in bilingual learning settings because it facilitates the learning process, decreases frustration, enhances intellectual capacity, and deepens the understanding of intricate concepts.

In line with this, the teachers also supported the extensive use of the primary language and culture in successful bilingual learning. Students were allowed to process information and discuss concepts in their primary language. Evidently, all the native English speaking teachers found creative ways to help their third-grade students to understand key concepts in Math and Science by including a mixture of primary language strategies that facilitated comprehension. With this regard, one of the native English speaking teachers added: *“A Thai teacher in this regard can be a great assistance. At times there appeared to be little difference between bilingual and typical English-only classrooms in the role of the primary language.”*

Primary language support, therefore, became the powerful effect in effective bilingual learning as it provided comprehensible input, understanding of abstract concepts, and equal access to the core curriculum. On a regular basis, it was used to provide access to abstract concepts by employing a variety of instructional practices. As one of the teachers explained,

“It is important for the primary stage of bilingual learning. The students’ home language can be supportive to develop their academic proficiency and facilitate content acquisition even when a teacher does not speak Thai.”

Accordingly, incorporating student’s native language apparently promoted formation of cognitive academic language proficiency because the students were better able to gain a deeper understanding of concepts, which could then transfer to academic learning and understanding (Skehan, 2003).

Another effect of bilingual education learning was relevant to modifications of instructional practices in order to help the students to understand the core curriculum and facilitate academic success. Most of the support component was dependent on individual teachers’ creativity and willingness to experiment. The teachers shared the same opinion that success in this endeavor would only occur with teachers who had plentiful resources and materials, and perhaps training opportunities. In addition, one Thai teacher emphasised:

“It is important that a school guide us and also collaborate closely with determined instructors to implement sound instructional theories and methods into practice.”

Moreover, when developing a primary language support component in a bilingual setting, all the teachers agreed that parents could provide invaluable assistance in helping to make instruction understandable for the Thai students. Using parents for lesson previews, clarification, and conceptual development could provide a powerful bridge when a teacher was trying to help students to understand abstract concepts taught in bilingual classes.

This was compliant with what Lopez (2003) and Mora (2000) suggested in their studies that parents could help clarify abstract ideas, especially when the curriculum called for common cultural issues. The potential for parental support in conceptual development was endless, particularly when teachers became adept at using the strengths of the family to enhance their curriculum.

This notion of parental support was very different from what was typically expected in various schools. Some parents may have more resources and abilities to help their children than others. Thus, it was imperative for the teachers to understand their students' society and families in order to ask parents to help in ways that they can be successful and will enhance the educational experience for students. Nevertheless, some parents might be overworked, stressed out, or unable to support. Teachers need to use a slightly different approach to help out their students. For this reason, without parental involvement should not be a reason for students' failure.

Overall, sustainable development of bilingual proficiency could be a positive effect of bilingual education. The teachers are expected to provide a quality language support component in their classrooms as well as staff development activities should be accompanied by appropriate materials and technology to implement the suggested strategies. A material-rich classroom is essential for mainstream teachers to be able to create learning environments that provide English language learners with increased access to the core curriculum.

The status of both Thai and English languages also needs to be proactively raised within bilingual classrooms to help all students and parents see the value of biliteracy. Speaking a second language is not only seen as an asset but as a problem to be fixed. Even though none of the standards address status of the language, it is imperative that language and culture be valued and honored within the school and classroom setting to increase the likelihood of student success.

Furthermore, cultural aspects could play an important role in this bilingual learning context. The teachers revealed that the school had a policy of elevating the status of the languages and valuing biliteracy by incorporating culturally authentic literature, artifacts, and historical figures into the core curriculum, having students share their personal cultural stories in the classroom and presenting a variety of angles on important historical events of both two different cultures. As stated earlier, the status of the Thai language also has a profound impact on the success of English language learning in a bilingual setting.

As one of the teachers remarked, "*When a teacher values the Thai and English languages spoken in class and gives students credit for their growing biliteracy, students begin to feel a sense of belonging and cultural compatibility.*" Accordingly, Lindholm-Leary and Howard (2008) put forward that being proficient of two languages will be viewed as a valuable asset to be recognised publicly in the school and outside. Raising the status of the language within a school, in this respect, cannot be an isolated event in a classroom but should be part of a systematic effort that includes as many facets of the schools community as possible (Robinson, 1992).

Implications

Both a review of the literature and the interview conducted in this research identified the academic rigor of a bilingual programme as contributing factor leading to successful fulfillment of helping students become bilingual and bi-literate. The literature regarding successful bilingual programmes is overwhelming positive if certain key elements exist. It is the same element that parents should consider when choosing a programme or determining if this education model is a good fit for their children and family.

The key element of parental involvement entails gathering information and that act of making a personal commitment should they end up choosing this model of education. In order to meet the mission of the programme, a full commitment to the school from kindergarten through sixth grade is required for students to achieve the bilingual, bicultural and bi-literate potential. Parents play a critical role in fostering this growth and work in partnership with teachers and administrators to achieve this goal. They need to be supportive in building bicultural relationships with other parents and families. They also need to accept that they might not be able to help with homework or that their child may speak a second language better than the parents.

In addition, the quality of the teaching staff at the bilingual programme should be considered because it is critical to its success. All classroom teachers should be credentialed and bilingual in the languages taught by the programme. They need to be passionate about the bilingual learning goal about developing the students' language proficiency.

Regular and open communication with staff is very important. Also, professional development opportunities to facilitate their own growth as educators should be supported.

Future research in determining key factors should include a broader perspective of those associated with a bilingual programme. Constituents to include may be parents of current students, parents of incoming students, depending on the timing of the survey, teachers at the school and staff who administratively support the school. Each of these groups has a unique perspective and may identify elements others have not considered.

Conclusion

The results of this study help to advance the debate surrounding the effectiveness of a bilingual learning programme and are aligned with previous research (e.g., Collier and Thomas, 2004; Genesee, 1983; Lindholm-Leary, 2005; Lindholm-Leary and Howard, 2008; Thomas and Collier, 2002), suggesting that a bilingual learning programme provides an effective instructional approach for elementary bilingual students.

On the whole, the bilingual learning programme has positive effects and is beneficial in multiple ways. Early benefits of bilingual learning should not be disregarded. The third-grade students begin to show improvements in core subjects that are hardly found when they were in earlier grades. This indicates that the students undergo a more immersive bilingual experience. The results suggest that balanced-language instruction to some extent promotes academic achievement in bilingual students. Hence, the more bilingual experience and the more balanced exposure to both of their languages the students have, the more advantages they gain for promoting their learning success.

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