

Meeting Challenges: A Narrative Inquiry into an English-Chinese Bilingual Education Program

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the challenges and difficulties experienced by an English-Chinese bilingual education program in the largest school district of a south western state in the U.S., in hopes of shedding light on the development of English-Chinese bilingual education and bilingual education in general. The majority of the studies on bilingual education are focused on elementary Spanish-English programs; there is not much research on Chinese-English bilingual education, not to mention the research studies that systematically examine the challenges faced by an English-Chinese bilingual program. This study adds to this body of research by unpacking a particular Chinese-English bilingual program, grounded in Cummins' argument that "(t)he accumulation of such case studies presents a rich and robust picture of bilingual education that can benefit practice and influence policy (Cummins, 1999, p. 8)." 8 challenges this program has experienced are identified and analyzed. Readers will walk away with not only the knowledge of the implementation of this particular program, but also important insights into how to advance bilingual education programs in the midst of all the constraints in the current socio-cultural and political contexts.

Key words: English-Chinese bilingual education program, narrative inquiry, challenges, constraints.

Introduction

Among all the foreign languages popular in the United States, Mandarin Chinese ranks in the top tier as the world's most widely spoken first language. As China rises to global economic power and Chinese Americans constitute the largest Asian group in the U.S. (Census Report, 2015), there is a growing trend of learning Chinese in the U.S. This paper aims to examine the challenges and difficulties experienced by an English-Chinese bilingual education program in the largest school district of a southwestern state, and the 7th largest school district in the U.S., in hopes of shedding light on the development of English-Chinese bilingual programs and the bilingual programs in general.

Opened in August 2012, this school is the first 100% dedicated Mandarin language immersion school in this state. It is a two-way immersion or dual language immersion—strong additive bilingual education program, with bilingualism and biliteracy as the goal of the school. It initially served grades PK-2, and has gone up to a grade level each year in the past three years. It is currently serving students from PK through 5th-grade, and working to develop a middle school immersion curriculum in the coming years. With the approval of a multi-million funding for a new building and campus, its ultimate goal is expanding to serve PK through the 8th grade. As stated on the school website, its vision is "to immerse students in a culture-rich environment that allows them to become balanced bi-cultural and bi-literate citizens for the global economy."

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Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry uses stories as the portal through which human experience is interpreted and made meaningful both individually and socially. Reduced to its essence, narrative inquiry is "the study of experience as story" (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 22), which is also termed as a "personal experience method" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Featuring "open-ended, experiential and quest-like qualities" according to Conle (2000, p. 50), "the desired outcome is not a generalization but a narrative which renders clear the meaning inherent in or generated by a particular subject" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997, p. 76). Arising from a Dewey notion that the principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation (1938), the greatest force driving narrative researchers is to "enter into and participate with the social world in ways that allow the possibility of transformations and growth" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 425).

The participants of the study include Mr. Chuang, the school Principal, Mr. Reid, Assistant Principal, Ms. Wan, a Kindergarten Chinese teacher, and Ms. Bailey, a 2nd grade English teacher. Each participant took part in an interview based on a semi-structured interview protocol, which lasted approximately 1 hour. The interview time and location were determined according to the participants' preferences. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim with the participants' written consents, and the transcripts constitute an important source of the data. Other types of data include informal communications with the participants, thick piles of school observation field notes, and a large number of documents accessed from school and district websites.

Three analytical tools characterized by narrative inquiry—broadening, burrowing and storying and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990)—were used for "narratively cod(ing)" the "lived stories" of the participants. During this process, the "internal and existential conditions" simultaneously inherent in the experience of the participants were paid special attention to, which will be reflected in four directions according to Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 417). These directions include inward, which means the internal conditions of participants' feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions; outward, which means the existential conditions, the environment, or reality the participants are situated in; backward and forward, which means seeing stories occurring in an ever changing life space in the past, present, and future (See Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 417).

Finally, 8 challenges this Chinese-English bilingual program has experienced were identified (a) lack of Chinese curriculum resources, (b) the state high-stakes standardized content-area tests, (c) lack of budget, (d) pressure from the parents, (e) teacher-parent communication, (f) making academic content in Chinese comprehensible, (g) lack of instructional time, and (h) teacher recruitment. They then subsumed under categories and elaborated on in the "Discussion" section that follows.

Discussion

Challenge 1: Lack of Chinese Curriculum Resources

The challenge manifested most distinctly in this study is the lack of Chinese curriculum resources, especially in teaching Math and Science in Chinese. Resources readily available are mostly in English. Massive translation has to be done, which creates a heavy workload on the part of Chinese teachers. For example, Ms. Wan shared, "There are a lot of very good story books to assist the teaching of math, but all in English. I have to translate them and this is very time-consuming." She has made painstaking efforts to create teaching materials, e.g., vocabulary cards, life cycle posters, animal and plant concepts, visuals, power points, videos, games, etc. "I have spent enormous time finding, adapting, and making these materials to be able to use them in my teaching," said Ms. Wan. Additionally, she developed her own way of utilizing English videos in Chinese Math and Science instruction.

She would turn off the sound when playing the video and explain to students what is showing in the video in Chinese, which is found effective too. Without all the Chinese curriculum resources needed, maintaining a pure Chinese immersion learning environment has become extremely difficult.

In the first year, the school translated the district math curriculum into Chinese, but quickly found that “Translation doesn’t really work. You can’t just translate an English language textbook strictly into Chinese for students who are Chinese language learners. That level is too high.” (Mr. Chuang). This means that teachers have to create vast materials on their own suitable for students for the classroom to be pure immersion. Since the 2nd year, the school has started directly using the English textbook adopted by the district but orally taught in Chinese. “So we haven’t been able to maintain the pure immersion environment. That [lack of Chinese curriculum resources in Math and Science]’s been a challenge.” Mr. Chuang admitted.

Challenge 2: The State High-Stakes Standardized Content-Area Tests

The state testing requirements for English proficiency and academic content are like two swords hanging over the head of school administrators and teachers. All students are required to meet or exceed the state’s academic standards as measured by state standardized tests, which means apart from learning Chinese, students are held to the same English language arts, math, science, and other content-area standards as their peers in regular public schools. Therefore, this Mandarin Chinese immersion school is under immense pressure to make sure students perform well in the standardized tests.

Mr. Chuang introduced that he had invested tremendous energy in collecting test preparation materials, and ensure teachers carve out time for test preparation on a daily basis despite the already full curriculum schedule. Additionally, every Wednesday afternoon, the school has an early dismissal, during which, Chinese teachers and English teachers work as a team in curriculum planning and make sure their curriculum support each other so as to give students the best test preparation.” This is very important for programs like ours,” said Mr. Chuang. He also added, “Parents at this school would not be happy with simply passing the standardized tests; they aim for excelling, because their kids were already top students when entering our school. What they look to is something equaling the best regular schools in the district.” Undoubtedly, the pressure from the state standardized tests for the school is monstrous.

Challenge 3: Lack of Budget

This school is especially in need of budget, comparing with regular public schools, because it requires a lot of what other schools may not need, e.g., developing all the new Chinese curriculum and instructional resources, sponsoring Chinese teachers’ working visas, funding teacher training (foreign language teaching, sheltered instruction, etc.), all unique to this English-Chinese bilingual program. In 2015, the school managed to obtain funding from the district to help pay three Chinese teachers’ visas. However, in 2013 and 2014, teacher visas were all paid out of the school’s already tight budget (four teacher visas, with \$4,000 per teacher).

Mr. Chuang, the Principal, disclosed that the school always seeks for more financial support, for instance, from the Confucius Institute in addition to the district central office. We need more communication and marketing to make the public understand we are unique, what our needs are, and what we are trying to accomplish. It indeed takes more or different resources to run a program like this. You may run into resistance if you don’t communicate well with the district or parents. (Mr. Chuang)

Challenge 4: Pressure from the Parents

In the storytelling of all the four participants, pressure from the parents surfaced as a challenge experienced by all. To cite Mr. Reid, There is every kind of challenge you can imagine [at this school]. Demanding parents who expect a lot more from their teachers is definitely one. It’s part of what makes this school great, but puts a lot of pressure on teachers, and some might not be used to that level of pressure. Mr. Chuang spoke to this point by making the following notes, “Parents are here all the time. They ask you a lot of different questions.” When mentioning parents at this school, Ms. Wan even used the word “picky,” and a Chinese idiom “look for a bone in an egg” to describe how nitpicking parents can be at this school. She attributed it to the characteristics of the familial background students are from. To be accepted by a magnet school, parents have to devote time to the application process one year in advance. It is usually the parents who emphasize their children’s education and who themselves are well educated and socio-economically advantaged, and hold a higher expectation for their children.

All participants told of a story revolving around parents' concern about homework. Some parents believed that the homework had been too much. Other parents felt the opposite, and maintained their kids didn't get enough homework, and were not pushed enough. A disagreement hereby arose where "parents demanded two different things and the school was stuck in the middle" (Mr. Reid).

The ultimate solution was: Parents voluntarily convened at the school, discussing what would be the optimal amount of homework for their children. A good middle ground was worked out regarding a minimal amount of homework required for all, and reasonable, appropriate, additional homework for others who may benefit from it.

Everything has two sides, with no exception for a high degree of parent involvement. "On the one hand, you feel you have already made your best effort, but parents are still being fastidious which can really frustrate and annoy you. On the other hand, it stimulates me to do even better, so that parents won't have any complaints," said Ms. Wan.

Challenge 5: Teacher-Parent Communication

Comparing with regular public schools, establishing and maintaining a good teacher-parent communication seems especially important and challenging at this school. Parents' lack of understanding of an immersion program and its curriculum presents a challenge to the school. To gain parents' support which is crucial to students' academic achievements, teachers have to communicate with parents clearly and frequently to make sure they understand what their children are expected of as they advance. Thus, a high demand for the English proficiency of Chinese-part teachers is indispensable.

However, as Mr. Chuang recognized, Chinese-part teachers tend to lack the necessary skills to communicate with parents in an effective way. He further explained, "An effective communication involves both linguistic and cultural knowledge. They (Chinese teachers) don't have the cultural background. Sometimes their body language offended parents, and sometimes their explanation was not clear enough and caused misunderstanding."

Both Mr. Chuang and Mr. Reid told an incident that happened when miscommunication occurred between a Chinese teacher and parents. The teacher meant to communicate to parents a minor misbehavior between kids, but the way she described it misled parents into interpreting it as a "fight." The parents then became very upset, thinking their child was under attack and treated unfairly. An originally minor issue unnecessarily escalated into something severe, and took a lot of communications between the school administrators, the teacher, and parents to figure out what truly happened and resolve the misunderstanding. Mr. Reid made the following remarks,

We need to make sure we communicate well with parents, and build a cohesive culture. We also want teachers to feel supported. We don't want them to feel constantly criticized or under the microscope. So we've done a lot to encourage communication. We want them to feel good on both sides. We (school administrators)ve been working as mediators. We try to make everyone understand we are all here for the kids for the same goal. Culture needs to be built, and improvement needs to be made [in terms of teacher-parent communication]. (Mr. Reid)

Challenge 6: Making Academic Content in Chinese Comprehensible

A prominent question that concerns all bilingual education teachers and administrators is: How can we make sure students keep up with the content learning while developing the proficiency in a second language? This is the challenge that comes with all types of bilingual education programs, with no exception at this school. When half of the program is taught in a foreign language—Chinese in this case and students learn all content areas (Math, Science, and Social Studies) in Chinese, it is foreseeable that some students may struggle in learning the content knowledge in Chinese. As Ms. Wan commented, "Though I'm a native Chinese speaker, teaching Chinese and grade-level content in Chinese are two different things. I always have to rack my brains to come up with various ways to make my teaching comprehensible, in addition to the everyday classroom communications."

The school has tried every means possible to help teachers to better cope with this challenge. It sends teachers to receive training in Utah whose Chinese immersion curriculum this school models after; it invites sheltered instruction specialists to the campus to give teachers hands-on workshops; it organizes teachers to visit other bilingual education programs in the district; it pays teachers to attend the professional conferences nationwide, etc. It is through these various avenues that teachers keep abreast of the knowledge and skills essential for helping students understand the academic content and the language necessary to communicate with others in accomplishing academic tasks related to the content areas. All these endeavors offer the best assurance that students will not fall behind academically while learning Chinese.

Challenge 7: Lack of Instructional Time

As the school faces the challenge of teaching students to listen, speak, read, and write in Chinese, it is also expected to meet the same grade-level academic content standards as their peers in regular classrooms. This special characteristic of a bilingual education program determines that teachers are constantly in desperate need of more instructional time. The Chinese teacher, Ms. Wan made the following remarks,

I teach not only Chinese but also math and science. When teaching math and science in Chinese, I have to teach language first. For example, what addition and subtraction mean in Chinese has to precede the teaching of actual math problem-solving. I draw pictures, use visual aids; physical movement among many other strategies to get across the math concepts to students in Chinese, which all takes time. I am usually two weeks behind district's teaching calendar. I always feel I need more time, I need more time. (Ms. Wang)

Likewise, a shortage of time is also keenly felt by English-side teachers, who not only teach English language arts, but also support the learning of math and science by introducing and reinforcing the topics in math and science in English so that students get to learn and practice the concepts in both languages. As the English teacher—Ms. Bailey said, "I would say the biggest challenge of this program is time." She then went on,

A regular teacher at schools that are self-contained has more luxury of time, whereas we are really very constrained for time. We only have half of the day. We have to find ways to squeeze it (various curriculums) in, chunk it with other materials if we can to find the fastest and easiest way to get the information across. Since time is what we are lacking, you have to make sure everything you do in your class is efficient, no drilling or practice the kids don't really need. If you find they don't need any more practice because they already master it, you need to move on. So we must plan appropriately, increase teaching effectiveness, be purposeful about how we design our English curriculum, and have to do a lot of adjustments and prioritizing to make sure we hit the most important things. (Ms. Bailey)

Such tight instructional schedule raises a high demand for teachers' ability to use instructional time as effectively as possible. Both sides of the teachers have to be adapted to and competent for organizing a fast-paced classroom, as reflected by Ms. Wan and Ms. Bailey. To optimize the limited time available for instruction, teachers at this school do especially well in instructional planning and implementation. They tend to make more efforts to have all the materials, equipment, and activities carefully planned beforehand so that students can engage in a smooth flow of the classroom activities and gain the most out of the classroom.

Challenge 8: Teacher Recruitment

Finding both Chinese and English teachers who are highly qualified is "always a challenge," in the words of Mr. Reid, Assistant Principal of the school. In terms of Chinese teacher recruitment, though the school has a far larger applicant pool than needed, most of the Chinese-native-speaking applicants have no experience in American education; know little about classroom management in American public schools or how to teach in a bilingual program like this one, all vital for them to handle the various challenges as illuminated above.

On the other hand, English teacher applicants are not adequate, due to various reasons. Some English teachers have reservations about such a Chinese-English bilingual program, whether or not it can work; some somehow think that they have to know Chinese to be able to teach at this school; and most simply do not expect that there are also English-teaching positions here where they will also have a large room to grow and prosper professionally. Therefore, unfortunately, the school has not received many English-teacher applicants as it would otherwise like to.

However, the school administration has done its utmost to procure the most qualified teachers for both Chinese and English sides. When snagging an experienced Chinese bilingual teacher is not possible, they provide training on various aspects, from instructional methods to classroom management, instructional technology, working with parents, and so forth. Moreover, the school offers continuous professional support for teachers at different stages of their career.

In response to the challenge of hiring English teachers, the school has utilized many different ways to reach out to and attract excellent teachers, attending more recruitment events, using every network, paying them more, etc. "It's getting better now as we are establishing our reputation," Mr. Reid delightfully said.

Concluding Remarks

Since 2002 when No Child Left behind Act came into being, the Bilingual Education Act was replaced by a new Title III, "Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students." Unlike the previous Bilingual Education Act, Title III has an exclusive focus on English. It requires only that Limited English Proficient (LEP) students attain English proficiency and academic content in English as outlined in state English language proficiency and academic standards. No recognition of the personal and societal benefits of bilingualism and bilingual education is included in Title III. The state, local educational agencies, and schools are held accountable for helping students to develop English proficiency and core academic content knowledge by requiring "demonstrated improvements in the English proficiency" and "adequate yearly progress" on state academic achievement tests (Cite from Wright, 2010, p. 60). Bilingual education has become optional, and as a matter of fact, marginalized.

Under such educational and policy backdrop, this research study seems more significant; as it uncovers the challenges, a Chinese-English bilingual education program has experienced and brings to light the discourses of support for bilingual education and linguistic diversity. Moreover, either most of the research studies on bilingual education programs compared with English-only programs or evaluated particular types of bilingual programs, including little or no narrative account of the program that explores the complex, lived experiences of the educators involved in them.

Utilizing narrative inquiry allows a greater potential of presenting an in-depth case study providing a more up close look at a particular program in context. The greatest power of narrative research is transcending the specialties of research in the immediate context to influence the discourses and practices of a larger educational community. Readers will walk away with not only the knowledge of the implementation of this particular program, but also important insights into how to advance bilingual education programs in the midst of all the constraints in the current socio-cultural and political contexts.

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