The Bridge: Making Cross-Linguistic Connections

By Cheryl Urow

The students sit quietly in rows as they practice for the math portion of the state standardized test. Despite the fact that they have been receiving math instruction in Spanish, the state requires that they be given the academic achievement test in English. The teacher reads the first question aloud to her students:

The sum of 6 and 5 is:

A) 1       B) 65       C) 30       D) 11

The students look at the options. Suddenly, one student says, “¿Maestra, sum es como ‘sumar’?”

Making Connections

It’s always exciting when a student makes a connection. It demonstrates to us, as teachers, that the student has learned and internalized the information, and can apply it in new ways. The ability to make these kinds of connections is evidence of higher-level thinking and is, in essence, the goal of all teaching. The lessons, facts, and skills we teach students in school are of little importance if the students cannot generalize and extend this learning to novel and different situations. When a student can make a cross-linguistic connection - that is, when the student can connect what is learned in one language and apply it to new situations in the other language as the student does in the vignette above - the student is demonstrating the ability to take advantage of and apply resources across his or her two languages. The ability to make these cross-linguistic connections allows students to actively take advantage of all their linguistic resources, is the theoretical underpinning of bilingual education, and is the instructional focus of the bridge.
The Bridge

The bridge is that part of the lesson or unit where the focus is on instructing students in how to transfer what they have learned and stored in one language into the other language. The focus moves from teaching content, to teaching the language of content in both of the students’ languages. It is the part of the lesson or unit that explicitly allows students to meet the goal of bilingualism and biliteracy – goals of dual language education – and the goal of transition – the goal of transitional bilingual education.

In bilingual or dual language programs, for example, students may only receive math instruction in Spanish, and science instruction in English. How then, can they be expected to be truly bilingual and biliterate? If they have never been formally instructed in math in English, how can they be expected to do math, write about math, discuss math in English? It is the bridge that prepares students for these bilingual abilities.

The bridge typically happens at the end of unit, when the students have mastered the content and understood the big idea. The focus of the bridge is on language, rather than on content. It is that part of the unit where students are given the English labels, for content they have learned in Spanish (or, alternatively, where they are given the Spanish labels for content they have learned in English).

An Example of a Bridge

The bridge may look like this: once pre-K children have learned about Spring, the teacher returns to the bulletin board she and the students have been creating together. On the bulletin board are drawings the teacher and students have made of the symbols of spring. The drawings include concept they have as they have studied in Spanish: a rainbow, a puddle, raindrops, flowers, the sun, rain boots, a rain jacket, a rain cloud, etc. The teacher reviews the Spanish vocabulary associated with the pictures by engaging in the actions she and the students developed to go along with each idea. For example, when talking about botas de hule, the students mime putting on their boots, and when talking about charcos, the students act out jumping in rain puddles. After reviewing these concepts and their
associated actions the teacher dons her magic scarf, signaling that she will now be using English as the medium of instruction.

Once the children see the teacher put on her scarf, they recognize that she will begin using English. She continues to mime the actions for the key vocabulary, but this time she asks the students if they can name the associated concept in English. Because this example is taken from a dual language classroom in the United States, many of the students in the class speak English at home and others are exposed to it daily through media or in specials classrooms. Some students are able to shout out “rain boots” as they mime putting on their boots, and “puddles” when they perform this action. The teacher provides any English words that the students don’t know. Once all the words have been introduced in English, the teacher repeats the words and looks for the appropriate actions – a kind of “Simon Says” utilizing spring vocabulary.

The Extension Activity

After spending some time on the bridge, the instructor moves to the extension activity. All the children sit quietly on the rug to listen to a read aloud in English. The read aloud is a book about spring. This book, complementing the information studied during the Spanish instruction on the season, is not simply the English version of a book they have already read in Spanish. Rather, it is a different but related text. Before she begins reading, the teacher instructs the students to act out any key spring vocabulary they hear. So, as she reads the book she comes across the word “rain boots”. When she says these words, the students mime putting on rain boots, in this way indicating that they understand the word in English as well as in Spanish.

The Metalinguistic Focus (see table on last page)

In addition to transferring what they have learned in one language into the other language, the bridge is also the opportunity to focus on explicit instruction on the similarities and differences of the two program languages. In this case, because the students are so young, the metalinguistic focus may simply be on identifying which words are in English and which are in Spanish. At this age, many children are still in the process of developing the ability to differentiate between and label their
two languages. During the metalinguistic analysis, the teacher returns the students’ focus to the spring pictures and asks the students if they can tell her the name of any of the pictured items in any language. As the students volunteer the labels, she asks them to specifically articulate whether the label they have provided is in English or Spanish. As the students give her the vocabulary, the teacher records the words on a T-chart: English words on the left side, in one color, and Spanish words on the right side, in a different color. Just as children at this age are learning to categorize colors and shapes, during the metalinguistic focus part of the bridge they are learning to classify and label their utterances in either Spanish or English.

For older students, the metalinguistic focus can turn to cognates (words that sound the same in the two program languages; for more information on English-Spanish cognates, see: http://www.esdict.com/English-Spanish-Cognates.html), gender, noun-adjective order, or the use of prefixes and suffixes, for example.

**Some Hints for Implementing the Bridge**

- It is much easier to focus the bridge on concrete concepts (family members, community helpers, the water cycle, prime numbers) than abstract skills (sound-symbol correspondence, decoding, predicting).
- If you are new to bridging, it is easier to begin bridging in the content areas (math, science, social studies) than in language arts. Integrate language arts skills (summarizing, predicting, point of view) into bridges in the content areas.
- Plan a metalinguistic focus that meets an observed need of the students and that is cognitively appropriate, but be prepared to change that focus depending upon student interaction during the bridge. For example, if you planned on comparing noun-adjective word order in Spanish and English during a third grade bridge of perimeter, volume, and area, but the students focused on linguistic extensions (also sometimes referred to as false cognates – like using the word *carpeta* to mean carpet), then go ahead and focus on linguistic extensions.
- As students get older, a bridge may have more than one metalinguistic focus.
The Bridge is The instructional moment when the teacher brings the students’ languages together to guide students in transferring knowledge and comparing and contrasting their languages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Bridge is…</th>
<th>The Bridge is not..</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>interactive and student-centered.</td>
<td>a list of words provided by the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the opportunity to put new labels on learned concepts.</td>
<td>translation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a planned third linguistic space where Spanish and English are brought together for the contrastive analysis of languages</td>
<td>Flip-flopping, concurrent translation, or haphazard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flexible, and can be adapted to a variety of program models</td>
<td>a packaged program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the beginning of English literacy instruction</td>
<td>the entirety of English literacy instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Element and area of focus</strong></td>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
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| **Phonology (sound system)** | - Sound-symbol correspondence (e.g., the [k] sound: “qu” or “c” in Spanish; “c” or “k” in English)  
- Silent letters (e.g., “h” and “u” in Spanish; many in English)  
- The existence of the [th] sound in English but not in Spanish; therefore, students select the closest Spanish phoneme, which is /d/  
- Sounds that are different in the two languages.  
- Sounds that are similar in the two languages. |
| **Morphology (word formation): prefixes and suffixes shared between the two languages (cognates)** | *informal* – informal  
*informar* – inform  
*socialismo* – socialism  
*desastreoso* – disastrous  
*preparar* – prepare  
*profesión* – profession  
*educación* – education |
| **Syntax and grammar (sentence structure)** | - Spanish uses the initial inverted exclamation point; English does not (e.g., ¡Me encanta! – I love it!)  
- Articles have gender in Spanish but not in English (e.g., el *título* – the title; *la revolución* – the revolution)  
- In Spanish accents change the meaning of words (e.g., *el papa vive en Roma; la papa es deliciosa; mi papá es muy trabajador*)  
- Spanish has many reflexive verbs; English has few (e.g., *Se me cayó*)  
- Conjugation of verbs in Spanish reduces the need for the pronoun. (e.g. ¡Voy!)  
- English contains possessive nouns; Spanish does not (e.g., my grandmother’s house – *la casa de mi abuela*) |
| **Pragmatics (language use)** | - Questions about age avoid the world “old” in Spanish because it has negative connotations (*¿Cuántos años tienes?*)  
- Figurative language from English is translated directly into Spanish: *Estoy encerrado afuera* (I am locked out!) rather than *Me quedé afuera.*  
- Spanish constructs are used during English (e.g. *Mis padres ganan mucho dinero.* My fathers win lots of money). |

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