Investigating English Dominance in a Chinese-English Dual Language Program: Teachers' Language Use and Investment

Authors : Peizhu Liu

Abstract : Dual language education, also known as immersion education, differs from traditional language programs that teach a second or foreign language as a subject. Instead, dual language programs adopt a content-based approach, using both a majority language (e.g., English, in the case of the United States) and a minority language (e.g., Spanish or Chinese) as a medium of instruction to teach math, science, and social studies. By granting each language of instruction equal status, dual language education seeks to educate not only meaningfully but equitably and to foster tolerance and appreciation of diversity, making it essential for immigrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized students. Despite the cognitive and academic benefits of dual language education, recent literature has revealed that English is disproportionately privileged across dual language programs. Scholars have expressed concerns about the unbalanced status of majority and minority languages in dual language education, as favoring English in this context may inadvertently reaffirm its dominance and moreover fail to serve the needs of children whose primary language is not English. Through a year-long study of a Chinese-English dual language program, the extensively disproportionate use of English has also been observed by the researcher. However, despite the fact that Chinese-English dual language programs are the second-most popular program type after Spanish in the United States, this issue remains underexplored in the existing literature on Chinese-English dual language education. In fact, the number of Chinese-English dual language programs being offered in the U.S. has grown rapidly, from 8 in 1988 to 331 as of 2023. Using Norton and Darvin's investment model theory, the current study investigates teachers' language use and investment in teaching Chinese and English in a Chinese-English dual language program at an urban public school in New York City. The program caters to a significant number of minority children from working-class families. Adopting an ethnographic and discourse analytic approach, this study seeks to understand language use dynamics in the program and how micro- and macro-factors, such as students' identity construction, parents' and teachers' language ideologies, and the capital associated with each language, influence teachers' investment in teaching Chinese and English. The research will help educators and policymakers understand the obstacles that stand in the way of the goal of dual language education—that is, the creation of a more inclusive classroom, which is achieved by regarding both languages of instruction as equally valuable resources. The implications for how to balance the use of the majority and minority languages will also be discussed.

Keywords : dual language education, bilingual education, language immersion education, content-based language teaching