

The Threshold Hypothesis

Jigsaw Reading B2

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Bilingualism and Content Instruction

Imagine yourself in a learning situation where your past experience has not prepared you to grasp the new content that you are expected to learn. Now imagine that these difficult ideas you are trying to learn are presented in a language that is not your native language; in fact, it is a language you do not understand. The teacher speaks without the use of pictures, illustrations, gestures or clues about meaning. Suppose further, that this is one of your first experiences with formal schooling and that you might also have a difficult time learning content.

You would have difficulty learning if the only medium of instruction available to you were written texts, even if these texts were in your native language. Finally, suppose that your classmates all have the language skills needed to learn the material and that the class pace is based on their speed of learning, not yours. As the days progress, you fall further and further behind. You are overwhelmed by all you are expected to learn. You begin to think “I’m just not good at this school thing.” You wonder what value your native language and culture have since performance in the new language is what is valued most in this environment.

The Threshold Hypothesis (Cummings, 2001)

Students whose academic proficiency in the language of instruction is relatively weak will tend to fall further and further behind unless the instruction they receive enables them to comprehend the input (both written and oral) and participate academically in class.

In learning a second language, a certain minimum ‘threshold’ level of proficiency must be reached in that language before the learner can benefit from the use of the language as a medium of instruction in school.

This situation is one that many language minority students find themselves in when they enter school. Because they cannot understand the language of instruction—it is not comprehensible to them—they cannot learn the content being taught. Educational experiences like this demonstrate the negative consequences of bilingualism. In order for bilingualism to have neutral consequences on children, they must develop enough academic literacy skills in either their first or second language for them to learn academic content. The positive benefits of bilingualism begin to accrue, according to Jim Cummins’ theory, when students reach a level of balanced bilingualism; namely, when students can gain access to academic written and spoken language in either their first or second language.

The threshold hypothesis explains two kinds of research findings. First, research by Collier and

Thomas shows that four to seven-year-old language minority children are at the greatest risk for academic failure. When children have a minimum of two years of schooling in their native language and develop native language literacy, they are more likely to be academically successful in their second language. The threshold hypothesis explains these findings by arguing that when learners have minimal academic proficiency and literacy development in their native language, they are more able to learn from the school curriculum and develop academic proficiency and literacy in their second language.

Second, the threshold hypothesis also explains why learners who are allowed to use their minority language for most or part of their elementary school experience show cognitive and academic advantages over their monolingual peers. The threshold hypothesis argues that “balanced” bilinguals who are literate in both languages receive positive benefits from bilingualism.

Let us return once more to the initial story. The story suggests the teacher provided a context-reduced learning experience. In other words, the teacher is using only words to communicate the curriculum to the learner. The learning situation is not context-enriched through the use of pictures, links to the child’s native language, gestures, demonstrations, or clues to what the meaning of the language.

Making a learning situation context-embedded may appear easier for elementary teachers than secondary teachers. That may be an artifact of the kinds of textbooks used in secondary schools. Also, secondary teachers are often taught to make a course easier for students by reducing the complexity of the language and number of texts students are exposed to. The benefits of elaborating content through the use of pictures, examples, vocabulary activities, or embedding content in the experience of the students are less frequently discussed as strategies for reducing the complexity of language.

What the threshold hypothesis reveals is that students need to develop proficiency in a language so that they can gain access to the curriculum. Research results report that the best way to do this is to support students in developing and maintaining literacy in their native language. The threshold hypothesis also reveals that when students cannot gain access to the curriculum, because learning materials aren’t comprehensible, they fail to progress academically and linguistically. This suggests that the lower the language proficiency of the child, the more necessary it is that learning tasks use strategies that embedded communication and texts in a rich and relevant context for learners. In addition, these tasks should be cognitively demanding. Helping students develop cognitive complexity will increase the likelihood of growth in their linguistic skills in both languages. Of course, what it means to provide a context-embedded curriculum will change as students develop higher levels of academic language skills.

Unfortunately, second language learners can fool us. We may think, based on their spoken language that they have more sophisticated and advanced language skills than they do. The threshold hypothesis reminds us that students need academic language skills that will give them access to the curriculum in either or both of their languages or they will suffer the negative consequences of bilingualism. Teachers should think carefully about the learning tasks they assign bilingual students: What does it demand linguistically, cognitively, and socially)? Will the demands promote cognitive and linguistic development? What must the child bring to the task to be successful? How can it be made relevant to the students’ past experiences? How should it be presented? What text modification will support the student? What will constitute evidence of task success? The threshold hypothesis provides ways to think about the academic success and failure of our students. It also helps us think about how to promote their success rather than failure.

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**Principles of
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