

Teaching Young Learners with the C3 Framework

Inquiry in Dual-Language Elementary Classrooms: Promising Practices Across the Inquiry Arc

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Classroom Transcript

Recuerdas que en estudios sociales estamos pensando [points to head] en la pregunta: ¿Es justo [holds thumb up] cuando todos reciben lo mismo igual? [Gestures to show both index fingers together on the same level] ¿Y la palabra “justo,” qué significa en inglés?

English Translation

Remember in social studies we’re thinking [points to head] about the question: Is it fair [holds thumb up] when everyone gets the same thing? [Gestures to show both index fingers together on the same level.] And the word “fair,” what does it mean in English?

In this lesson opening, Teacher HB reminds students about the compelling question for the inquiry unit started the day before. Gathered in a circle on the carpet, with Teacher HB kneeling in front of a tray with two plants and containers of water, the kindergarteners consider whether it is fair if the larger plant and the smaller plant each receive the same amount. With gestures, explicit connections across students’ linguistic repertoires, and concrete, tangible examples, Teacher HB works to make inquiry accessible to emergent bilingual and multilingual learners (EBML).¹

In the thirteen years since the publication of the C3 Framework, structured inquiry has become more common in elementary social studies classrooms.² As a result, more diverse groups of students are gaining access to instruction grounded in questions, sources, tasks, and informed action. This growth calls for additional attention to ways to support inquiry-based instruction in a variety of settings. In this article, we describe considerations for teaching inquiry in a dual-language immersion (DLI) context.

Features of Dual-Language Immersion Contexts

DLI is rapidly growing in the United States, in part to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.³ Research generally highlights DLI as the ideal form of bilingual education for promoting equitable instruction that supports historically

marginalized groups.⁴ In the long term, students who participate in DLI programs perform at or above students schooled only through English.⁵

Under the umbrella of DLI, two-way immersion (TWI) programs divide instructional time between two languages, with a mix of EBML students with different home languages learning alongside one another.⁶ In a 50/50 model, each language is allotted equal instructional time as the primary language used in class. Content-driven instruction, such as social studies, is generally assigned to one target language and provides a “motivational basis for purposeful communication and a cognitive basis for language learning.”⁷ Spanish programs, like the one we highlight in this article, account for about 80% of all DLI programs in the United States.⁸

We describe experiences and promising practices from social studies taught in Spanish as part of a TWI program at a Virginia elementary school. The school district is a leader in prioritizing inquiry-based instruction, investing substantial time and resources in professional learning and curriculum development in support of inquiry and “whole-truth history that elevates multiple perspectives.”⁹ The district’s elementary social studies curriculum consists of a set of inquiries that use the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) to outline unit compelling questions, primary and secondary sources, formative tasks, and ideas for taking informed action.¹⁰ Spanish immersion teachers at the

school (like Sarah and Arianna) are responsible for preparing these IDMs for Spanish instruction. Alexa observed full inquiry units in their classrooms, which sparked the collaborative work featured here.

Benefits of Inquiry in a Dual-Language Immersion Context

Based on our experiences, an inquiry approach to *estudios sociales* in a DLI elementary classroom supports student growth both socially and academically. Some of the most significant benefits are increased cultural awareness and confidence to participate in a learning space where something is new to everyone. Inquiry-based instruction prioritizes open-ended questions, allowing students to share evidence and examples from their own lives. In turn, their peers recognize that individual similarities and differences extend beyond language; children begin to understand that the way they view the world is a result of their family, culture, communities, and experiences.

Inquiry and language learning can be mutually reinforcing. Inquiry questions, source analysis, and discussion involve robust language inputs and outputs as students read, write, speak, and listen. Social studies is a prominent space where students engage in *translanguaging*, drawing on their full linguistic repertoires to convey and construct meaning.¹¹

Translanguaging is “the process in which students perform bilingually in the myriad multimodal ways of classrooms—reading, writing, taking notes, discussing, singing, and so on.”¹² Inquiry-based instruction, too, is grounded in multimodality: Students regularly analyze physical artifacts, photographs, audio recordings, and other sources that are not inherently bound to a specific language. In this way, inquiry-based instruction can be more accessible to EBML students than textbook-focused social studies pedagogy.

Promising Practices Across the Inquiry Arc

We believe all students deserve the powerful, language-rich learning experiences that can stem from inquiry-based instruction. In our ongoing conversations about bringing inquiry to life in Spanish immersion classrooms, we have tried to capture *promising practices*—features of instruction that support learning through inquiry in a DLI context. Many of these practices align with existing asset pedagogies for supporting culturally and linguistically diverse learners.¹³ In this article, we intentionally frame our promising practices using the dimensions of the C3 Inquiry Arc.¹⁴ We include examples and vignettes from real classrooms, and all student names are pseudonyms.

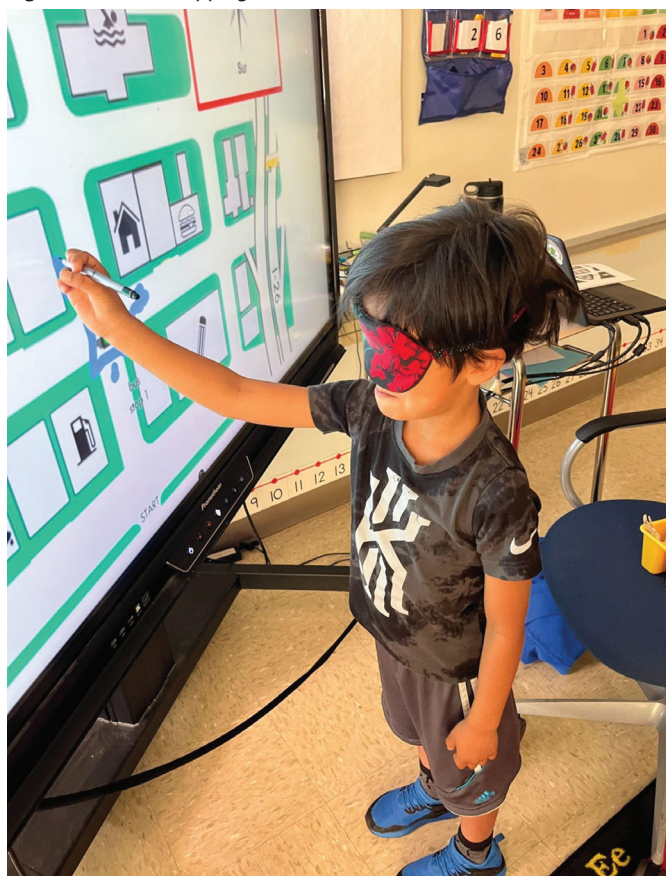
Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries that Draw on Student Interests and Identities

Dimension 1 focuses on the importance of creating and adapting questions as the core of inquiry. We have observed that teaching and learning is most successful when questions are framed with

student interests and identities in mind.

In first grade, for example, students are expected to learn the cardinal directions and to read map symbols. These skills can seem irrelevant if they are taught outside of a context that kids understand. Sarah was given a C3 inquiry based on maps of Arkansas.¹⁵ The compelling question, “How do maps talk to us?” got students excited to share what they knew, perhaps due to the “personalized” framing of the question.¹⁶ However, students showed little interest in applying their knowledge to unfamiliar maps or in learning more. In response, Sarah compiled maps of the school and other familiar places to supplement the inquiry, and students were tasked with helping a friend, who has their eyes covered, navigate to their favorite places on an interactive map using only cardinal directions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Student mapping



Using local places in the maps inquiry was especially crucial to student engagement in the DLI setting. For students still developing proficiency in the target language, seeing their favorite trampoline park or restaurant drew their attention and encouraged participation. Interest motivates effort!

Drawing on student interests and identity in inquiry also encourages students to start asking their own questions. In the first-grade economics inquiry, “What choices do we make with our money?”¹⁷ Sarah supplemented the provided IDM with an activity in which students could “purchase” coloring sheets. Students had to choose whether to spend their money or wait

Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence Supported by Formative Assessment and Concrete Representations

Dimension 3 includes “the skills students need to analyze information and come to conclusions in an inquiry.”¹⁹ We observed that visual sources, already valuable for emergent readers, became essential for EBML students. For example, in the inquiry about Monacan culture, students examined images of artifacts used in daily life (past and present) from a local museum. In most cases, preparing visual sources for analysis in a Spanish immersion context simply required updating existing thinking routines (e.g., *Veo, Pienso, y Quiero Saber* in place of *See, Think, Wonder*; see Figure 4).²⁰

Figure 4. Classroom image and student work from “See, Think, Wonder” routine about artifacts



In the observed units, students still often needed additional support to evaluate sources and respond to compelling questions. Ongoing formative assessment was vital to determine topics and skills that needed additional attention. For example, after the initial day of the kindergarten inquiry—“Does fairness mean everyone should get the same things?”—Teacher HB noticed that students were struggling to evaluate evidence in the visual images of different sized dogs and different sized bones (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Formative task with concrete representation in response



Teacher HB responded by shifting to an even more concrete approach: Students were shown a large plant and a small plant and asked to consider whether it was fair if the two plants received the same amount of water. In the discussion that followed, Teacher HB supported students to evaluate a concrete source and build understanding of an abstract concept using evidence from observation.

Successful inquiry-based instruction in a DLI context requires ongoing attention to student understanding. Arianna uses a

checklist to ensure she is regularly touching base with individual students. Sarah structures check-ins with a quick line-up at the end of lesson, giving each student an opportunity to show and tell about their work on formative tasks. These informal assessments help teachers determine where students need additional support or scaffolding during the inquiry process.

Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action with Authentic Local Examples

At the end of the kindergarten “fairness” inquiry, Teacher HB’s students noticed a problem. The class had spent time on the playground trying out the adaptive swing. They had a visit scheduled that day with Conner, an older student at the school who uses a wheelchair. They wanted to tell him about the swing. But the equipment was not hanging correctly.

Teacher HB: What did you observe when we were on the playground trying out the swing? Steven?

Steven: If he gets in the swing, then he’ll turn over!

Teacher HB: Did anybody have a different observation with the swing? To add to what Steven said? Zyasia?

Zyasia: But if the swing is tilted back, it would be okay.

Teacher HB: If the swing is tilted back more, then Conner can stay on the swing safely. Raise your hands to share. Charlotte, what else do you want to add?

Charlotte: He could fall off the swing and hurt himself.

Teacher HB: Right. We found out that the swing, as it is, is tilted forward and if Conner falls out, he could get hurt. Did we think that was fair?

Class: No!

During Conner’s visit, the kindergarteners asked him about the swing and whether it is comfortable for him to use. The Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) paraprofessional accompanying Conner helped explain that the kindergarteners were right: The adaptive swing does not work for him, and instead he uses a wheelchair-accessible platform swing. The children went on to write a class letter to the principal about the problem with the adaptive swing. In this way, they took authentic, relevant action related to their inquiry question.

Dimension 4 is all about sharing conclusions supported by evidence. This can happen on a small scale, such as a presentation to a peer, or on a larger scale, involving civic action to share information or make a change in the school or community. This dimension can be challenging to implement and is sometimes skipped due to time constraints or teacher uncertainty about

suitable activities.²¹ However, in our view, informed action based on local examples is an essential aspect of successful inquiry when teaching in a DLI context. In a DLI classroom, language demands are layered on content demands. Making the inquiry immediately applicable in a tangible, authentic way increased student engagement and brought learning to life. In addition, we saw increased student motivation when teachers established a clear and authentic purpose for their learning.

In another example, a unit focused on U.S. history post-Civil War culminated in building a model of the historic Vinegar Hill neighborhood, a thriving African American community near the school that was razed in 1964. While the original inquiry suggested concluding with the creation of a picture book or historical marker, building a model of the neighborhood was an intentional design choice to support EBML students' learning (Figure 6; for the original inquiry, see www.k12albemarle.org/our-departments/instruction/social-studies/reframing-the-narrative). Crafting the neighborhood provided opportunities to produce concrete models in support of vocabulary development and helped young students come to a deeper understanding of the impact of destroying the homes and businesses. Placing the model in the school cafeteria was a form of action to help other students learn about Vinegar Hill.

Figure 6. Labeled student-created model of Vinegar Hill



Conclusion

In this article, we outlined promising practices for supporting EBML students using the dimensions of the Inquiry Arc as an organizing framework. While our observations focused on K–2 classrooms, we believe these practices are relevant across grade levels:

- *Incorporating student interests and identities* is often highlighted in asset pedagogies and is essential in engaging young children in a linguistically demanding inquiry process.²²

- *Intentional vocabulary building* supports both language development and content learning. Strategies like noticing cognates explicitly value students' existing knowledge, and translanguaging allows them to use all their languages as resources for learning. In upper grades, vocabulary instruction might also include analysis of root words and affixes, offering students additional tools for making meaning across languages and social studies disciplines.
- *Formative assessment* allows teachers to monitor progress and respond to student needs. In upper grades, students can take a more active role in reflecting on their learning and identifying areas for growth.
- *Concrete representations* scaffold learning by drawing on physical objects, embodiment, and lived experiences to bridge language differences and bring learning to life.
- *Authentic, local examples of action* help students become engaged members of their community. As they grow older and have more agency in how they spend their time outside of the classroom, authentic inquiry experiences in school have the potential to be even more transferable and relevant in their lives.

We believe all students should have the opportunity to pose questions, examine multiple sources, construct arguments, and practice the skills necessary to take meaningful action in their communities. Our goal is to illustrate some of the strategies that have made inquiry-based instruction possible in Spanish TWI classrooms in one district. Our hope is that these promising practices will support other educators who strive toward this goal.

Notes

1. We use this asset-based term throughout to refer to students who are acquiring a new language in school, whether they are becoming bilingual (learning a second language) or multilingual (learning a third or additional language).
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