

The Role of English in a Tongan Bilingual, Mathematical Context.

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Abstract

This paper discusses some of the findings of my doctoral study. The study investigated how mathematical understanding and language switching influence each other in a bilingual context. Such investigation questions long-held misconceptions about bilingual learning contexts that have overlooked the fact that the nature of bilingual students' mathematical understanding may be similar to monolingual students, and that bilingual students can voluntarily "swap" or switch languages in the process of talking about, or doing, mathematics. The evidence from my data proposes that the effect of bilingual students' learning and development of understanding in mathematics is largely dependent on the kinds of mathematical images each bilingual student associates with his or her language. The evidence from my study is certainly applicable to other Tongan-type bilingual situations that involve individuals using words with no direct or precise translation between a dominant Western language and an indigenous language. Ultimately, the findings of my study challenge the assumption that Tongan-type bilingual students have enormous problems in the classroom. *Allowed the flexibility of language switching and thus access to appropriate terms and images in either language, they do not seem to be mathematically disadvantaged.* It is therefore important in this perspective to see how English as a language for learning and teaching can be used appropriately and effectively in a Tongan-type bilingual classroom.