ENTREVISTA
Fred Genesee

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Prof. Genesee’s primary research interests focus on bilingualism and bilingual first language acquisition in normal and impaired populations. In particular, his research examines the early stages of the acquisition of two languages with the view to (a) better understanding this form of language acquisition and (b) ascertaining the neuro-cognitive limits of the child’s innate ability to acquire language. He is also interested in second language acquisition in school and the modalities for effective acquisition in school contexts.

AEB had the pleasure and the honor of interviewing Fred Genesee at the First International Conference on English Teaching in Educational Institutions which took place in Valencia last May 6th, where he participated as one of the keynote speakers. We had the chance of sharing his valuable opinions and ideas about interesting issues around bilingual education.

Fred Genesee is also an honorary member of AEB and gives great support to our Association.

Carmen Aguilera (C.A.) — «Earlier is not better». I’m aware that you know about bilingual programs being implemented in Spain, and particularly in the Region of Madrid. What kind of advice would you give to our policy makers concerning the time for our children to start receiving bilingual education?

Fred Genesee (F.G.) — Research has shown that starting to teach a second language early in school can be very effective but the research also tells us that starting to teach a second language in higher grades at the end of elementary school or at the beginning of secondary school, for example, can be as effective in some cases. So, despite the fact that everybody believes that earlier is better, in fact in the context of schooling you can start at different ages and be very effective. This is very helpful from the policy point of view because it means that policy makers and educators have a choice. You can begin earlier or you can begin late. Sometimes beginning late is easier from the schools’ point of view because then native speaking language skills can be developed in the early grades and the students can use those language skills to acquire the second language. In communities in Spain where there is a second language like valenciano or catalan, those communities may want to emphasize the first language in the early grades and then introduce English or a second or third language later and be confident they can be very effective. It is also from the resource point of view often easier if you start a second language later because you don’t have to have all of the materials available at all grade levels. If for example you teach two languages or three languages at the beginning in the early grades, it means your teachers have to be trained in three languages; you need materials in three languages, you need a curriculum, and a schedule that accommodates all three languages. In contrast, if you focus on one or two languages in the early grades, things are much easier. So the good news is that research shows that early is often very good. If you are raising children in their home, early is the best; but in school there’s a choice; you can start early, you can start late. Late second language learners can actually be faster than young second language learners because they can transfer a lot of their first language skills to the second language.

C.A. — Do you think students at risk are not able to cope with bilingualism?

F.G. — There’s always been a lot of concern that children who are at risk for academic difficulty will struggle more in a dual language program than in a monolingual program. This makes a certain amount of sense because if students are struggling in their own language surely they are going to struggle in another language. However, research has shown both in school context and in out-of-school contexts that students who are at risk for difficulty, specially children who are at risk for language learning, can become bilingual. There is research that has compared children with language impairment, children with Down syndrome, and children with autism spectrum disorder that shows that these children can become bilingual within the limits of their disabilities. In school-based studies, we’ve have looked at children who are at risk because they have a learning disability and, again, we found that these children do just as well in a bilingual program as they do in a monolingual program - so there is no reason really to exclude these children from these programs. I personally believe they should be given the opportunity to acquire a second language because competence in more than one language can be an advantage for them.

C.A. — How about methodology? Is more exposure better?

F.G. — More exposure is not necessarily better unless you have good pedagogy. Because students have more time means that they could learn more; but they only learn more if they are in classrooms where there is very good pedagogy. Sometimes more exposure does not produce better results.

C.A. — Are students’ first language learning skills acquisition and learning process affected by receiving bilingual education?

F.G. — That’s a common concern. There is no evidence that learning a second language necessarily jeopardizes or diminishes children’s first language and in fact, in areas related to literacy and
there’s evidence of a lot of transfer between the first language and the second language - students who develop strong first language skills also develop strong second language skills and vice versa. To be specific, students who learn to read and write in a first language can transfer those skills to the second language; as a result learning to read the second language is relatively easy because they already know how to read. It’s also important for parents to engage their children in rich language experiences at home. It’s not up to the school alone to develop the students’ language skills. It’s important that their parents read to their children and that they engage them in using language for critical thinking and analysis because it’s not just a matter of what happens at school, but outside school as well.