



BY ARACELIS NIEVES

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DUAL LANGUAGE IMMERSION AT ANA G. MÉNDEZ UNIVERSITY:

Forging Hopes and Dreams

Yadira is a specialist in neurology and a graduate of the Universidad de La Habana. She worked for 20 years in the emergency room of a hospital in Havana, Cuba. She loved her job, but like many immigrants, she moved to the United States three years ago in search of a better quality of life for her family. Unfortunately, she cannot work in her profession because her diploma is not valid in the U.S., and she does not know enough English to get a license as a neurologist. Therefore, having the opportunity to obtain a degree in nursing at the University of Ana G. Méndez University (AGMU) in Maryland has been, according to her, a blessing.

Orlando was an oncologist in his country, but like Yadira, he cannot practice in the United States. He has worked in fast food restaurants, in construction, in maintenance and cleaning—in short, anywhere that offered him an opportunity to support his family. Twenty years passed before he learned about AGMU and decided to resume his passion and his mission. Like Yadira, he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in nursing and is about to graduate.

Fabio was born in Ecuador. He arrived in Maryland 30 years ago, when he was 23 years old. He wanted to be an engineer, but instead found himself taking whatever jobs were necessary to support his mother and sisters. While volunteering for a charity, he discovered his passion for psychology and was recruited as an addiction therapist. He knew that he needed to be better prepared academically and decided to study psychology. However, he realized that working two jobs would make studying for this degree very difficult. Then he discovered AGMU. The flexibility in the study schedule and the AGMU hybrid teaching model allowed him to fulfill his work responsibilities *and* graduate with honors last June.

In addition to speaking English, having a college degree is a fundamental asset in the U.S. However, only 15% of Latinos have a bachelor's degree compared to 53% of Asians, 37% of Whites, and 24% of Blacks (Bucknor, 2016). More than a quarter of Latino workers (27.7%) have not earned a high school diploma.

A MODEL

Founded in Puerto Rico in 1949 to promote the cultural, social, and economic well-being of Puerto Ricans, Ana G. Méndez University opened its first campus in Orlando, Florida, in 2003 to continue helping the Puerto Ricans who had emigrated to that state, as well as the other Latinos residing there. AGMU now has five additional campuses: South Florida (2006), Tampa (2010), the Maryland campus (2012) and the related DC campus (2014), and the most recent campus in Dallas (2015). A virtual campus was established in 2013.

AGMU implemented the Dual Immersion Model (DLIM) and became the first bilingual postsecondary program for adults offered in the U.S. It provides a multicultural and bilingual academic environment that develops and refines students' specialized academic language skills—in English and Spanish—in a variety of disciplines, while they simultaneously earn an associate, bachelor's, or master's degree.

Major Components of the Dual Language Immersion Model



This model uses a student-centered, integrated, and collaborative curriculum in all disciplines. Teachers consider themselves facilitators of the learning process and must be experts in both languages, since 50% of learning occurs in Spanish and the other 50% takes place in English. One week the content is taught in Spanish and the following week content is taught in English. However, students can speak English and

Spanish simultaneously according to their communication needs. They have a safe space in which to speak, read, write, research, and learn without being ashamed because they think they cannot communicate “well” in English.

Nevertheless, professors encourage students to speak in English during the corresponding “English” week. Assessment is structured so that 70% of the grade is related to content and 30% to language skills. Consequently, when designing the curriculum and activities for each course, special care is taken to develop speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in both languages (Toledo and Pentón, 2015). Even though the four aspects are taught in an integrated manner, speaking and listening skills are emphasized when teaching in English, while writing skills are emphasized when teaching in Spanish.

The DLIM is an accelerated, hybrid program in which classes are five, eight, or fifteen weeks long, depending on the discipline. Before coming to class, students must review the content through assignments given to them via the Blackboard Learning Management System. They may watch a video or two about a topic and summarize the information presented through a graphic organizer. Classes are long (4 hours with a 15-minute break), so professors use hands-on, interactive, and challenging activities like scavenger hunts, jeopardy, debates, online interactive word games and Kahoot, role playing, charades, and memory games to help keep students engaged.

For instance, a professor may begin a class with a Kahoot game to introduce the topic and determine if students have done the homework. Immediate feedback is provided. The next activities might be a word scavenger hunt to review the vocabulary studied in both languages, a jigsaw exercise, or a role-playing exercise to apply and analyze what has been learned. Each class might include four or five such activities. The learning process continues throughout the week through virtual forums, and students keep a journal to reflect on this process.

UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES

At AGMU students feel free to speak in their native language and more importantly, they can improve and strengthen it. No student is disciplined or punished for speaking Spanish as is still the case where many of them work.

I have been an associate professor of Spanish on the Maryland campus of AGMU for three years. I noted the enthusiasm, diligence, and eagerness of the students at the university and wondered why they were so full of joy, most after a long day at a full-time job. I watched and listened to see what motivated them and concluded that the Dual Language Immersion Model might have something to do with the excitement. I decided to formally investigate how the model might be impacting their attitude, self-esteem, language skills, and professional future.

I surveyed 300 students on four of the five AGMU campuses to identify what had motivated the students to enter the university, understand their vision of themselves in the context of the classroom, determine their level of satisfaction with the university, explore the influence of the program on their future professional plans, and define

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their level of language acquisition and the success of the transfer of those skills to English.

Ninety percent of the students surveyed said that they expect to earn a college degree. "I wanted to continue studying, but I was afraid of failing because I didn't know English and it looked bad if you speak Spanish in public," said one student adding, "until they told me about the Dual Language Immersion Model at AGMU."

As many as 85% of the students surveyed said that they felt very good about being an AGMU student, indicating three main reasons for this: 1) the bilingual model, 2) the flexible schedule, and 3) the facilitators' ability to teach in both languages. More than 90% of respondents said that they have been able to fulfill their dream of studying for a university degree thanks to the Dual Immersion Model, the one-class-per-week schedule, and the hybrid teaching model.

EMPOWERMENT

Satisfaction with the program is as high as 80%. The reason given almost unanimously for this level of satisfaction was that the DLIM facilitates learning in both languages. "I am satisfied because, if I have a question or doubt when we are in the English week, I can ask it in Spanish because the facilitator understands me," said one student, "and that gives me confidence." AGMU students have a voice; they say that they do not feel marginalized. They said that they feel safe and confident, and thus dare to take risks.

Because facilitators teach and compare grammar rules in Spanish and English, students gradually develop a better grasp of both languages and best of all, they are aware of it and are able to use both languages. This is part of what Ofelia García (2013) calls translanguageing, characteristic of a person who is a bilingual speaker.

HISPANIC IDENTITY AND CULTURE

The survey also revealed that 88% of the students feel prouder of being Latino thanks to the program.

There are more than 20 Spanish-speaking countries worldwide and many of them are represented in the AGMU student population. The Maryland campus is the most diverse, with Salvadorans constituting the largest student group. According to Bustamante (2019), the total U.S. Hispanic population reached 58,838 million in 2017, with Mexicans being the largest group (36,634,000 million), followed by Puerto Ricans (5,614,000), Salvadorans (2,307,000), and Cubans (2,298,000 million).

Every semester on the Maryland campus there is an activity called *This is My Story*. An Hispanic individual who has excelled in the com-

munity is invited to tell how they have achieved their dream. These role models provide inspiration for AGMU students.

BILINGUALISM

The physical, social, and cognitive benefits of bilingualism have been studied extensively. One of the cognitive benefits is that it increases mental agility; people who are bilingual have more mentally flexibility and are better able to perform several tasks simultaneously. Their increased ability to store and process information also makes them better able to solve problems creatively (Thomas & Collier, 2012).

In addition to learning in both languages across all disciplines, students are required to take four Spanish courses and four English Language Arts courses. The content of both are aligned to make it easier to learn and transfer skills between languages. When asked how these courses have helped them advance their bilingual skills, 86% of participants stated that their Spanish language skills had improved considerably and 73% claimed that their English skills had greatly improved, as well. Also, 66% indicated that, thanks to the Spanish courses, their English skills had improved significantly. "Learning to write essays in Spanish made it easier for me to write them in English," reported one student. Another student stressed that knowing how to express and organize ideas in one language made it easier to formulate them in the other.

Research has proven this to be the case. If language skills are mastered in the native language, students can more easily transfer those skills to a second language. For example, students who have



AGMU students working as a group.

already learned how to plan, develop ideas, review, and edit their writing in their first language can use those same strategies when composing in their second language (Wolfersberger, M. 2003).

Not surprisingly, the exploration of cognates included in one of the Spanish courses was specifically highlighted by students as a great help in learning vocabulary in both languages. According to Agnieszka Otwinowska-Kasztelanica (2015) "Teaching cognates may be important for the speed of language acquisition. However, in order to make use of cognates the student has to be aware of their existence; otherwise, the process of positive transfer from L1 may not take place."

Memorization is the first level of thinking in Bloom's thinking skills taxonomy. Speaking a second language forces the brain to use regions that are not used by monolinguals and, consequently, memory becomes more acute. Being bilingual creates new routes for associating concepts, making the information more easily remembered (Morales, J, et al, 2013).

IN THE WORKPLACE

As a Spanish language pedagogue, it was very important for me to know how and how much developing and refining the language had impacted students' work experience. Many of my students had told me that they thought that studying Spanish was a waste of time and money because they already knew Spanish. After taking the first Spanish course most realized that they were wrong. More than 90% of participants reported that taking Spanish classes had favorably impacted their work experience. Ways in which they said they benefited in the workplace included:

- "I received a salary increase,"
- "I have learned to speak diplomatically," and
- "I can provide better services to Hispanic clients."

For these reasons, 84% of the participants said that they would recommend the AGMU Dual Immersion Model to others.

CONCLUSION

The Dual Language Immersion Model (DLIM) offered at Ana G. Méndez University has a positive impact on the attitude, self-esteem, motivation, language skills, and future professional plans of students. It satisfies their social, emotional, and intellectual needs and gives them the confidence needed to believe in themselves and to realize that they can achieve their dreams if they work hard and persevere. The DLIM also promotes students' critical awareness and validates their identity, and students develop a support system that helps them challenge the racism, sexism, and social injustice that they encounter in the workplace or in the community.

The DLIM is a unique option for Latinos living in the United States who wish to earn a college degree, something that many see as impossible to accomplish. It allows students to study in an environment of support with a sense of community and gives them the hope needed to persevere because studying in this country is a great challenge and having the opportunity to do so in their native language while learning English is an important option.

This DLIM strengthens students' cultural identity and increases their self-esteem. They feel proud of their heritage. Students feel that they can represent the Latino community with dignity and help eradicate negative stereotypes.

In sum, the Dual Language Immersion Model at AGMU forges dreams and provides hope.

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