

Language Lessons

By Sherry Squires

**'It's like you
can see that
light bulb
coming on.'**

Rocio Vance's Nampa classroom looks like any other second-grade classroom.

The walls are lined with the alphabet, numerals, student artwork and other sources of inspiration for 7- and 8-year-old minds.

The announcement by Mrs. Vance that it's time to do math — and that the subtraction problems are going to require borrowing — produces the anticipated sighs.

But Room 20 at Central Elementary School is anything but ordinary. One student is from Thailand. Two are from Laos. Two are from India. All of them speak their native language, and little or no English. There are also 11 Spanish speakers and 12 English-speaking students.

It could be a formula for chaos. But the performance of Vance's students suggests something else is happening.

Spanish-speaking students who once were withdrawn during class are quick to shout answers when called upon, and



CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Rocio Vance and her students participate in a daily exercise that helps the children visualize math concepts.

they are reading at higher levels.

English-speaking students are learning Spanish. And in this bilingual classroom, students are learning at levels that rival any of their peers.

It has a magical air. But it's not magic, BSU bilingual education professor Jay Fuhriman says. It's a sorely needed new approach in education.

The Nampa School District is possibly the first in Idaho to adopt a plan for teaching young Spanish-speaking students basic academic concepts in Spanish, while still helping them learn English, Fuhriman says.

Fuhriman, who was born and raised in Nampa and taught and worked in the bilingual education office there, helped sketch the framework for the program last February. He wrote a grant that ranked in the top 25 percent of those submitted in 1997 to the U.S. Department of Education. It will pump more than \$1 million into bilingual education in Nampa over five years, allowing the district to hire more teachers and try bold new programs.

Fuhriman's grant rests on the belief that once children acquire knowledge in their native language, they can transfer it to their new language.

"Knowledge is knowledge regardless of the language," Fuhriman says. "Math is still math."

"They will learn English in spite of what we do. We couldn't keep them from learning English," Fuhriman

says. "Our problems will be solved when we get some academic proficiency."

Fuhriman says most bilingual programs over the last 25 years have been mainly transitional programs, meaning that they aim to replace Spanish with English quickly. But they have unrealistic expectations, Fuhriman says. Typically, it takes children about five to seven years to master a new language. In the old scenarios, students are bombarded with academics before they know English.

"Children never really master the language, much less the concept area," Fuhriman says. "It's sink or swim."

Statistics uncovered by Fuhriman and the Nampa district show that students who don't speak English proficiently sink fast when taught only in English.

By the end of second grade, they are at least 1 1/2 grade levels behind. By the sixth grade, when they begin to master the language, most are so far behind they can't catch up with their classmates.

The consequence: a Hispanic dropout rate in Nampa and statewide of 40 to 60 percent even for those students in tradi-

tional bilingual programs.

"You take a bumper toy — it hits a wall and backs up and turns at a different angle. That's what we're not doing in our schools. We're not bumpers. We're still standing at the wall revving our engines," Fuhriman says.

"That's what this program's doing, backing up and changing direction."

A year ago, there was only one bilingual teacher at Central, where about 35 percent of the students were Hispanic and about 25 percent of them spoke limited English.

Now, there is at least one bilingual teacher at each grade level at Central and Snake River elementaries, which qualified for the federal bilingual grant money because of their high Hispanic populations. More than 30 of those teachers are graduates of the BSU bilingual program.

In addition to the two schools funded by the grant, the district has made bilingual education available at other schools. Parkridge Elementary School has at least one bilingual teacher at each grade level. At

West Middle School, Nampa High School and Skyview High School, many subjects are taught in bilingual environments.

BSU began preparing bilingual teachers for roles



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Jessica Madrigal, left, and Nikki Patel work math problems during a class skill-building activity.

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Vance emphasizes cooperation during this problem-solving session with students Dianira Rios and Lucas Tobin

such as Vance's, Fuhriman says, because Nampa's program could be easily replicated elsewhere.

Consuelo Quilantan, Nampa School District administrator of federal programs, says the district began seriously assessing student needs about three years ago.

She recognized that the programs in place for Spanish-speaking students were not working.

About 2,000 — or 22 percent — of the Nampa School District's 9,000 students are Hispanic. About 1,500 students are classified as having limited English skills.

In 10 years, Nampa could expect to see a reduction in its Hispanic dropout rate from 60 percent to 20 percent, Fuhriman and Quilantan believe.

But Vance, a December 1996 BSU bilingual education graduate, says you don't have to wait 10 years to see the benefits.

She began the new school year feeling her way with a philosophy that was new to everyone. Vance, who is Fuhriman's daughter, said she has slowly transformed her classroom to incorporate the bilingual concepts that her father helped define.

In late November, Vance also began encouraging and helping her Spanish-speaking students to read in Spanish.

"A lot of the Hispanic students who were just sitting there are comprehending what they are reading now," she says. "They're answering more questions. They're getting their work done. It shows in their tests.

"I'm watching students have that spark in their eyes because things make sense now."

All students are in the bilingual classroom at their parents' request.

Still, some parents had concerns in the beginning. Vicki Zarchinski was one of them. Her son, Nathan, speaks English.

"To be honest, my worry was that if kids come here, they should learn to speak English," she says. "We didn't know how it would work."

But Zarchinski, who works in the reading

lab at the school, says she has seen results from the new approach. Results she didn't see before.

"It makes sense to me now. It's like you can see that light bulb coming on," she says.

The results have been classroomwide. No parents have withdrawn their students from Vance's class.

"Parents can see the expectations for the bilingual classes are as high as the regular classes," Central Elementary Principal Becky Stallcop says. "They see it as an advantage now."

The grant money also pays for the district to offer Spanish classes to English speakers. So far, 124 students have signed up. Stallcop says she expected only a handful.

As for Vance's students, they don't lag behind their fellow classes, Stallcop says, even though they are learning in two languages. Instead, Vance had to order more challenging material for them.

Two of the three second-graders who have mastered addition well enough to be listed on the schoolwide Hall of Fame are from her class.

"I was trying to envision a classroom like this and I was a little nervous about it at first, too," Vance says.

"But I know now that we do everything that all of the other classes do as fast and as good, and sometimes better."

Eyes likely will be on Vance's class and others like it in Nampa as school districts statewide struggle with high Hispanic dropout rates.

Vance believes she's making a difference one student at a time.

"I love doing this," she says. "I have fun in my class, but I have really high expectations for my kids. I've seen so many kids change their attitude. That's worth so much." □