Introduction

Babble Tree, LLC's, Bridges; Foundations for Bilingual Learning, is a language development program for non-English-speaking children. The Bridges Program addresses the growing need for bilingual support resources for parents and teachers working with beginning language learners. The program platform outlines core elements of effective vocabulary development and instruction for non-English-speaking students. Using this program, coupled with primary language and literacy support tools, students, parents and teachers will significantly shape future growth and development through positive learning outcomes.

Program Core

The Bridges Program is built upon a language acquisition approach whose philosophy matches the Natural Approach with a Total Physical Response emphasis. Students work to progress through language objectives in a low-anxiety, play-based learning environment. Within this method approach, the instructor provides comprehensible input in the target language in a consistent and thorough fashion. Opportunities are presented daily for the learners to develop understanding through movement and play.

What is the Natural Approach? The Natural Approach represents the natural stages of language development. A core concept of this approach is that listening comes before speaking. An infant typically listens to her/his language, and plays with reproducing sounds, for approximately 12-15 months, before speaking the first words that adults recognize and reinforce. The Natural Approach method supports the delay of speech because research shows that this delay ultimately increases speaking proficiency. Thus, the Bridges Program introduces new language first through listening, allowing speaking to emerge naturally. Preliteracy reading and writing skills for students' primary language support are presented in many of the suggested take-home activities. These materials are intended to inform and provide additional practice resources for families in the home prior to the formal instruction of reading and writing in English.

Total Physical Response, TPR, is an approach to second-language acquisition developed by Dr. James Asher. Asher and Dr. Stephen Krashen both use the key concept that listening comprehension provides the most effective introduction to second-language acquisition. The basis of TPR is listening activities in which students demonstrate comprehension by responding physically (by moving around, responding to commands, pointing, handling objects, etc.) Material learned in this kinesthetic manner is internalized more thoroughly and remembered longer.

The Bridges Program supports Lev Vogotsky's Social Development Theory. A major theme of Vogotsky's theory is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. Learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development. This concept refers to the distance between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help.

Background to the Methodology

The first way we know a child is beginning to understand language is by her/his physical response to commands. For example, we say, "Come here!" or "Wave bye-bye!" and the child indicates comprehension by responding with the requested behavior.

The Bridges approach works in a similar fashion. Once the teacher has presented the target language through a variety of simple commands, the learners indicate comprehension by actions and later begin to produce the target language. It occurs very naturally, with enthusiasm from the learners.

Reading and writing of the target language do not take place until the child is able to comprehend listening and is able to produce spoken language fairly well.

This research-based program method:
1. Introduces listening before speaking
2. Does not use translations as an instructional tool for working to develop the target language
3. Encourages students and teachers to engage in the target language of English throughout the English-language development portion of class

For a variety of reasons, the Bridges Program avoids translating primarily because words are abstractions; translation involves using one abstraction (the word in one language) to explain another abstraction (the word in another language). Instead, the program supports using props, actions, gestures, context and pictures to associate the new word with its concrete meaning.

Further, when individuals work to prolem-solve and figure out what words mean, they remember the words longer and their meanings as they have had to internalize the words. It is significant that children are listening to the new language during the language portion of the lesson.