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Bilingual Education: What Matters Most?

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Another September. The air is warm and hazy at the end of summer, in many towns the leaves are just starting to change, and all over the country, children, with their lunch boxes packed and brand new crayons in their schoolbags, head off at the start of another year. Their teachers will greet them, perhaps at the door, with a bright, ‘Good morning!’ They’ll show them to their desks, ‘This is where you’re going to sit.’ There will be some opening remarks, ‘I’m Mrs. Smith …’ And then, instruction will begin. The next group of first graders will be learning to read, while third graders learn cursive and fourth graders start long division. But what about the children who have not gotten past the ‘Good morning’? What about the children who don’t speak English?

This question is the foundation of the bilingual education controversy. How child language learners should be educated is a very complicated issue with convoluted debate surrounding it that further complicates the matter. My own position is that teaching English should be paramount. Helping language learners to succeed in mastering the Standard English they will need to do well in a university should be educators’ goal. These children need to learn ‘Good morning’, ‘deconstructionism’ and everything in between, but to do that children need special help, preferably in their native language.

Before we look at the issue of bilingual education today, we need to look briefly at its history to see how it began to receive American attention. In the past, most English learners were left to flounder in school, to ‘sink or swim’ as it’s called. Children could learn or not learn. Nothing was explicitly done to help them. This was especially the case following WWII, when the U.S. became increasingly nationalistic and isolationist. But as
the civil rights movements of the sixties were flourishing, the issue of bilingual education began to receive attention. In 1965, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty. Title VII of the ESEA, the Bilingual Education Act, became law in 1968. This act did not require bilingual education, but it provided funding for it (Lesslow-Hurley 1990).

Then, in 1974 Lau v. Nichols went to the Supreme Court. In this case, Chinese parents were suing the state because their children were not learning adequate English in school. The court ruled that 'something had to be done' (García 1997). That 'something' was not specified. The court merely said that school districts needed to 'affirmatively overcome' children's language struggles. This left the door open for the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to step in to make recommendations, called the 'Lau remedies', which advocated transitional bilingual education as the best solution (Rossell and Ross 1986). Transitional bilingual education is the weakest form of weak bilingual education. It begins education in the mother tongue, then transitions into majority language instruction.

Recently, bilingual education has become a heated and political topic, and an often confusing one for several reasons: (1) the terms in the discussion are not clearly defined; (2) many arguments are based on anecdotes; (3) there are problems with much of the research that has been done and problems with the interpretation of that research; and (4) often the people who argue about bilingual education have different goals. Before I go into detail on my stand on this issue and my opinion of what ought to happen in classrooms, we first need to examine some of the factors that convolute the evidence and the arguments.
First, there is the problem that the term ‘bilingual education’ is not very clearly defined. It is a term used for a whole kaleidoscope of programs, whose methods and results fall on a continuum that includes monolingual education for speakers of minority languages, which generally leads to monolingualism; what are called, ‘weak bilingual programs’, which incorporate the minority language and lead to monolingualism or limited bilingualism; and ‘strong bilingual programs’, whose goal is not only to maintain bilingualism, but also to foster biliteracy (García 1997). With all these variants, it is possible, basically, to make ‘bilingual education’ mean any curriculum used in attempting to educate children who have a chance of being bilingual. This potential looseness makes the evidence very difficult to compare, and it is not always apparent when looking at arguments what exactly the people are arguing about. So for the purposes of the rest of this paper, bilingual education will be defined as education in which the subject matter is presented consistently in two languages, with the goal of producing fully biliterate students.

The second complicating factor is that public debates are often based on anecdotal arguments. This is very wise as far as organizing speeches (or writing papers) is concerned because it triggers emotional responses. Examples can be found in many of the arguments in Hearing before the Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education of the Committee on Education and Labor in the House of Representatives. Who could fail to be moved by the personal story of Dr. Roberto Feliz, who was born in the Dominican Republic and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of ten, and found his monolingual classroom bewildering, and was terribly discouraged until learning in both English and Spanish saved him from dropping out (Hearing 1993)?
Or who could fail to be angry that Gregoria Jiminez had to hire a private tutor for her son because after three years of bilingual education, he still could not read or write in any language (Hearing 1993)?

But we cannot have a contest of dueling anecdotes. As heart-rending as many personal stories can be, the fact is, they are statistically equivalent to zero. They prove next to nothing. Whatever we decide about bilingual education, it must be based on solid research.

This brings up yet another complicating issue: there are many problems with arguments based on the studies that have been done on this issue, problems with design and methodology, and with the people who interpret the data. The National Research Counsel’s Committee on Developing a Research Agenda on the Education of Limited-English-Proficient and Bilingual Students (in this paper, referred to as the CDRA) found:

- The major national-level program evaluations suffer from design limitations; lack of documentation of study objectives, conceptual details, and procedures followed; poorly articulated goals; lack of fit between goals and research design; and excessive use of elaborate statistical designs to overcome shortcomings in research designs (August and Hakuta 1998: 55).

J.P. Greene of the University of Texas examined 75 studies and found that only 11 were methodologically sound. In order to qualify:

1) Studies had to compare students in a bilingual program to a control group of similar students.

2) Differences between the treatment and control groups had to be controlled statistically or assignment to treatment and control groups had to be random.
3) Results had to be based on standardized test scores in English.

4) Differences between the scores of treatment and control groups had to be determined by applying appropriate statistical tests (Greene 1998).

Another problem with the studies is the people interpreting them. As the CDRA found:

Most consumers of research are not researchers who want to know the truth, but advocates who are convinced of the absolute correctness of their positions (August and Hakuta 1998: 55).

The last complicating factor is that the people who argue about this issue have different goals. Some of the biggest arguments for bilingual education are based on preserving the self-esteem of language minority children (García 1997), who may view their languages, cultures and even their own identities as being threatened by English. These children may think that English is only for white people. Many children grow up in whole communities where everyone who is like them speaks their home language, and only outsiders speak English, so they may feel their identities are being threatened when they are asked to speak like an outsider. These children may not see any need for English, but, the argument goes, if we show them that we honor and value their language by using it in the classroom, we will protect them from responding badly to education (García 1997). Other arguments in favor of bilingual education center on the benefits of bilingualism, arguing that it is good because we live in a global economy and the world is not a monolingual place. To succeed in business, we need to be able to speak the languages of our business associates, and as José Serrano, a Representative from New York, argues, with free trade agreements and the global economy, multilingual citizens
will be an asset to our country (Hearing 1993). I can imagine greater global understanding through greater access to literature, mythology, and culture; and greater metalinguistic awareness. It would be wonderful if all children could grow up bilingual. Certainly that would be much preferred to spending time on foreign language learning in high school and college, when as Kathleen Marcos of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics asserts, children’s chances of gaining native-like pronunciation are slim (Marcos 1997).

These arguments for bilingual education are pitted against ‘opposing’ arguments, which rarely actually address the issues raised by those who are for it, but instead focus on how knowing English is important, and criticize bilingual education for failing to mainstream children quickly enough, which does not address its goals of identity preservation and honor, or biliteracy. Sally Peterson, president of Learning English Advocates Drive (LEAD), says,

Let’s all remember that the goal of bilingual education is to teach children English. We want all children to learn English as effectively and efficiently as possible and in the quickest fashion (Hearing 1993: 66).

It appears that what is most important to those who support bilingual education is that children learn to be bilingual, thus preserving their cultural self-esteem, and learn their other subjects well, though not necessarily in English, leaving them the option of making a slow transition into a mostly monolingual society. What is most important to those who oppose bilingual education is that children learn English and make a fast transition into monolingual classrooms in order to prevent language minority children from feeling like outsiders.
I am opposed to bilingual education, as I have defined it. I believe that because of the state of poverty and racism in our country, the goal of education for child language learners should be teaching them excellent Standard English. What the children need is to get out of poverty. The way to do that is to get good jobs. The way to that is to get a good education and to be able to get through an interview such that the employer is sufficiently impressed. To do those things, the children need to have a mastery of Standard English that will not only enable them to do well in college but that also will help them to fight against the stereotypes they face in this society. In discussing methods for teaching children English, we need to keep two things in mind: the time it takes to achieve context embedded proficiency, and that there cannot be just one plan that will work for every school.

There are three main arguments against my position: 1) In focusing on English, we will rob children of their cultures and hurt their self-esteem. 2) In focusing on English, we will produce monolingual speakers, and that would mean that the children have lost a needed skill, and that America has lost a resource. 3) In focusing on English, time will be lost on other subjects.

Let us first turn to the facts for my position: the states of poverty and racism. In looking at poverty, we need to examine the bleak statistics for child language learners, and as we turn to the issue of racism, we need to look at some sad, but true, facts about our country. First, a look at the financial situation immigrants face:

A lesson in poverty:

'I am here to inquire about the job …'

_Esto aquí averiguar sobre el trabajo._
According to the 1998 Statistical Abstract of the United States, 37.5% of Hispanic families in which the householder had no high school diploma were below the poverty level, compared to 18.4% of those whose householders had graduated from high school, and 6.2% of those in which the householders had their bachelors degrees. The dropout rate for Hispanics in California in 1993 was 40% before the tenth grade, and only 3% of California’s Hispanic graduates qualified for the UC system (Hearing 1993).

‘I am here to inquire about the job …’

*Wo lái zhè yìng wèi wǒ xiàng zhí dào rù yī fù yì fù gōng zuì gài wǒ.*

In 1989, 35% of families speaking Asian/Pacific Islander languages had incomes under $20,000, as did 57% of Spanish speaking families (August and Hakuta 1998).

‘I am here to inquire about the job …’

*Dojdov za da doznaam za rabotata.*

In 1995, 43% of first grade English learners attended schools in which seventy-five to one hundred percent of the other children were in poverty (August and Hakuta 1998). In 1993, seventy-seven percent of English learners qualified for subsidized school lunch programs compared to only thirty-eight percent of children from the same schools (August and Hakuta 1998).

Most English learners are underprivileged and poor, many of them here in California are growing up on the migrant buses, traveling from school to school, following the harvests as their parents move from field to field. These children especially are facing some of the worst school conditions in the country. Statistically, it appears that the best way to help get them out of poverty is to prepare them for the basically
monolingual job market by helping them graduate from high school and even college. To do that in America, these children need excellent Standard English.

The other half of the bleak picture that leads me to be against bilingual education is that most of these immigrants are minorities, and that means that they will likely encounter racism in the job market no matter how well educated they are. Racism is real in America. I do not think it is enough just to give minority immigrant children an education that results in English comparable to the average American. We need to strive to teach them English that is even ‘better’, more precise, more correct, completely free of a foreign accent, and if possible, as far as this can be taught, more vivid and eloquent.

Honestly, I value other languages. I am majoring in linguistics because I love languages. I would be thrilled if America were a multilingual place in which everyone grew up bilingual and all languages were respected.

But all my idealism aside, it was my English skills that were tested on the SAT. None of my college professors ever gave me the option of writing my papers in another language. And very few employers are likely to conduct interviews in languages other than English. The harsh reality is: Burger King training videos are bilingual. Investment banking interviews are not. That may be sad, impoverishing, and wrong, but we are not going to enact social change by taking some of the poorest, minority children, most of whom already face racial discrimination, and expecting their bilingualism to make a difference in combating monolingualism, cultural elitism, and racism in America. By doing that we run the sociolinguistic risk of having bilingualism interpreted as a marker of poor, minority status. In fact, it seems that this is already happening. As Judith Lessow-Hurley points out, many Americans have much greater respect for individuals
with college degrees who have become bilingual through their education, associating their abilities with elitism, while group bilinguals who are bilingual because they spoke a different language at home are not respected, but are associated with poverty (1990). Given that our country is elitist, racist, and basically monolingual, our primary goal must be to teach these children to speak the best, most standard, most eloquent English possible.

Now let us turn to the two things we must keep in mind if we are to give children a good English focused education: context embedded proficiency and flexibility of program design.

I believe that the use of native language instruction can be very helpful while the children are learning English. One reason for this is the disparity between learning time for context embedded proficiency, and context reduced language proficiency. Context embedded language proficiency is proficiency in situations in which the context is immediate and relevant. This is the type of communication that takes place in a social setting, such as on the playground. Context reduced language proficiency is proficiency in situations in which the context is abstract. This is the kind of input usually given in a class setting. It takes approximately two years to develop context embedded language proficiency. But it takes five to seven years to develop context embedded language proficiency (Baker 1996). During that time it really does make sense to use some native language instruction to ensure that students understand their subject matter.

What should the programs for language learners look like? It is important, however, that we do not take an approach that cites one best model (e.g., ESL, transitional bilingual education, etc.) as the only choice for the entire nation. But rather,
we should take the advice of the CDRA and view each program as a combination of components from which individual schools can tailor programs to use their resources to meet their needs (August and Hakuta 1998). Every school will have a slightly different situation in terms of number of children needing help, the range of home languages they speak, their backgrounds, and their home environments and experiences with English and with literacy. But some of the linguistic and non-linguistic components of successful classrooms as described by the CDRA are:

1) some use of the native language for clarification;
2) making the English comprehensible through demonstration using markers like ‘first’ and ‘next’;
3) explanation of the language structure as it is being used;
4) supportive school-wide climate;
5) a learning environment tailored to local goals and resources;
6) opportunities for student-directed activities;
7) use of instructional strategies that enhance understanding;
8) opportunities for practice;
9) systematic student assessment; and
10) home and parent involvement.

Of course, we cannot expect that if we implement a laundry list of components, our schools will become successful, but we can use these as guidelines to help teachers move in a good direction (August and Hakuta 1998).
There are those who would argue against my position, raising the three main arguments that I mentioned above, dealing with issues of culture, lost resources, and lost time on subjects other than English.

In responding to those that would say that if we produce monolingual speakers of English, we will assimilate them and strip away their culture, I would argue that learning English does not mean that children must be stripped of their culture. We do not need to teach children that only white people speak Standard English. In schools with the resources to do so, same ethnicity teachers, especially during the English learning years, could help to alleviate some of the racial tension. Schools with highly diverse classrooms, or schools which are not able to provide same ethnicity teachers for some other reason, can still incorporate elements of the children’s different cultures into their classrooms through the study of holidays, myths, and the histories of their home countries and immigrants from their countries with emphasis on the fact that America is almost entirely a nation of immigrants.

But beyond any kind of special curriculum, basic respect goes a long way. Children know what adults think of them. They should always be treated as valuable, and their languages and cultures should always be treated as valuable. While it is true that children need to learn English, there is no reason to give them the impression we want them to forget Spanish or Mandarin, or whatever other languages they speak. What we must do is give them a voice, a voice that can be heard by those who are entrenched in mainstream, monolingual American society. Toby Roth, State Representative from Wisconsin, quoted Philip Chiu, a Chinese-American, who said in the San Diego Union:
The most critical tool to achieve our goals is to speak better English than the whites...to better our English doesn’t mean to throw away our own heritages. It means the possession of an effective means to work with and compete against the whites (Hearing 1993).

Toni Morrison, in arguing eloquently that AAVE should be respected said,

I know the standard English. I want to use it to help restore the other language ...

(Morrison 1981).

If we want these children to be able to stand up for themselves, they have to know how to use the standard language very well so that people will listen to what they are saying rather than how they are saying it.

I think we also need to realize the role of the family in preserving culture. If these children’s home languages and history are important to them, they will fight to keep them alive. Parents are equipped to maintain conversational skills in the native language with their children if that is their desire. Educators should be sensitive and should always treat students’ cultures with respect, but while educators contribute greatly to children’s attitudes towards their cultures, we should not think that they are solely responsible for the maintenance of these cultures.

In responding to arguments about lost resources, I would argue that just as it would be wrong to force children to speak English only, it would also be wrong to force them not to. Some people (for instance, García 1997) look to education as the way to preserve minority languages and prevent monolingualism, but some children may not find that bilingualism meets their needs in this country. Language loss when the language does not meet any felt need of the speaker is not any more of a tragedy than quitting
piano lessons, or forgetting the structures of the molecules in organic chemistry. It might be argued that children's languages are intimately connected to who they are, and that if we do not maintain their languages we will be taking away children's identities. But if the identities of those children who lose their home languages were truly wrapped up in those languages, they would not have lost them. Our memories, linguistic or otherwise, are not stolen from us. We forget what we do not feel we need.

Many proponents of bilingual education have held up bilingual children as a national resource to be tapped (cf. Hakuta and Serrano in Hearing 1993). They may criticize an English focus for failing to make use of that resource. But again, I say that if bilingualism is important to children and families, it will be maintained, otherwise it is not right to expect English learners to maintain their language as part of a national resource. America is largely a monolingual place. If immigrants want to be as linguistically impoverished as the natives, no one should deny them that privilege. It is far more essential to their well-being that these children be able to do well on their SATs and job interviews than that they have the potential to aid in negotiations in their first languages. If bilingualism is a real need of this nation, then all children should be in bilingual education.

The third main argument against my position is Kenji Hakuta's, that in focusing these children's instruction on English, they would lose time on other subjects (Hearing 1998). My response is that as long as the children master English and math early in their education, they will be able to go on to learn any other subject. It is English and math that are the foundations for those other subjects. Critical reasoning, computation, and reading comprehension are probably the most valuable skills that can be taught in schools.
because with those skills students have access not only to the biology and history
normally taught in elementary school classrooms, but also to the linguistics, political
theory, industrial engineering, etc. that they will encounter later in their education. If
students’ exposure to science or social studies is limited in the early grades because of
time taken out for English instruction, they will be able to catch up easily if they have the
English and math foundation.

The best plan for those children who come to school in September unable to
understand ‘Good morning’ or anything else their teachers say is to do what Mr. Lau
wanted back in 1974, carefully and supportively to teach English learners the very best
English possible.
References


