

PAPER #2/Bilingual Education PAPER #2/Bilingual Education

February 11, 2003

Dan Baker

In America, the issue of bilingual education remains hotly contested because public schools remain geared toward English instruction. Increasing numbers of immigrants pouring into the United States during the past 30 years have created an even greater need to assist the socially and developmentally disadvantaged children of non-English speaking parents. Unfortunately, as political and emotional agendas on both sides of the English-instruction debate continue to wage war, children's needs and critical questions regarding importance of retaining cultural heritage often get lost in the commotion. Finding a plausible solution to the problem needs to start with pre-service teachers. During pre-service training, they must become aware of issues relating to bilingualism, and the importance of cultural competence. Hopefully, as a result of stronger interest in the cause and increased understanding of the nature of the debate, a more effective bilingual pedagogy can be realized.

Generally, bilingual education refers to programs designed for students whose native language is not English. Minority-language students are taught part of the day in their native language with the goal of moving them into mainstream English classes as quickly as possible. Theoretically, students in bilingual education programs keep up academically because they learn subject matter in their native language while they learn English. Bilingual education programs should not be confused with English as a Second Language (ESL)

programs. Students in ESL programs are taught English so they can learn the school's curriculum by receiving instruction in English. There is no attempt to teach reading or writing in the native language.

Of the different types of bilingual education programs, the most controversial appears to be “maintenance” bilingual programs. Designed to make students literate in two languages, the assumption here is that students learn English easier if they know how to read or write in their native tongue. During the time students learn English, they also learn the school's curriculum, and how to read and write proficiently in their native language. After learning English, students continue to learn content delivered in both English and their native language. Advocates such as Sonia Nieto claim this approach allows children who know how to read and write in their native language to become “more successful in school than children whose language is neglected by the school and who do not become literate in their native tongue” (Spring 164).

Like Nieto, other supporters of bilingual education understand the benefits of teaching English to minority-language students using a maintenance approach. David Corson, for instance, points to research indicating that bilinguals mature faster than monolinguals, “both in the development of cerebral lateralization for language use and in acquiring skills for development of linguistic abstraction” (112). He believes more exposure to using language generally translates into improved performances for bilingual students in “most of the areas of activity where language and thought converge” (Corson 112). One

study, a 1991 experiment measuring reading and math achievement in both English and Spanish, supports Corson's assertion. The study concludes that high proficiency bilinguals do outscore medium proficiency bilinguals, who in turn out-perform low proficiency bilinguals ("Advances"). Apparently, math knowledge and skills learned in Spanish do transfer to English, suggesting, "class time spent on developing the first language is time well spent" ("Advances"). Corson and others such as J.D. Ramirez see several intellectual benefits to bilingual programs, each understanding that "providing language minority students with substantial and relevant amounts of instruction in their primary language enhances their ability to improve their English language skills and their cognitive skills in content areas" (Advances"). In the end, research indicates that well-designed maintenance bilingual programs not only bolster overall skills and content knowledge, but also generally succeed at helping minority-language students develop English and their native language to a "high degree" (Krashen 5).

Most importantly, maintenance bilingual programs allow minority-language students a better chance to retain a cultural frame of reference. Not surprisingly, Mexican-Americans, Native-Americans, and Puerto Ricans remain the staunchest supporters of bilingual education, considering maintenance programs essential for retaining cultural tradition and heritage (Spring 164). No doubt, their interest reflects uneasiness deriving from a history of deculturalization programs created by the United States to abolish Spanish and Native American languages

(164-165). Because language is so strongly tied to cultural identity and the development of voice, bilingual educators agree that minority-language students should never have to sacrifice their native tongue, as it is “their only means through which they make sense of the own experience in the world” (Macedo 266). To cultures historically marginalized by hegemonic power relations in the United States that support social and cultural reproduction, learning English means more than mastering standardized reading and writing skills. It is about retaining voice, a cultural identity. Learning English should neither oppress nor negate cultural experience, and bilingual education must be “seen as a medium that constitutes and affirms the historical and existential moments of lived culture” (267 – 268).

Significantly, opposition against bilingual education appears to be growing. Widespread panic about immigration, public ignorance about how bilingual education helps minority-language children, and misleading rhetoric about the ineffectiveness of bilingual education programs, has led to increasing English-only initiatives designed to eliminate bilingual education. Just over two years ago, Arizona became the second state to adopt an English-only schools initiative. Modeled after California’s controversial measure adopted in 1998, Proposition 203 supports the idea of banning bilingual education for nearly all children learning English as a second language. According to the new law, students with limited English no longer receive instruction in any other language but English, “even in programs designed to teach them a foreign or Native

American language (“Bilingual”). Essentially, students are segregated by “language proficiency,” placed in structured English immersion programs lasting no more than a year.

Although results from bilingual programs may appear mixed, the idea cannot be dismissed completely. Immigration is not a historic issue. The immigration process in America is ongoing, and the changing population of U.S. schools guarantees the need to find plausible solutions to teaching English to immigrant children. In the past, teachers worked with students separated along racial, ethnic, or religious lines; at present, teachers teach in classrooms reflecting a global community. It is imperative, therefore, that pre-service teachers examine this reality, and begin exploring ways to make bilingual education more effective. Abandoning the idea completely means giving in to subtle forms of racism found in many English-only campaigns. So that all students have a chance to learn, pre-service educators must start looking for ways to improve existing bilingual education pedagogy. Once in the profession, young teachers can work on unifying teaching methodology, and fashioning approaches that realistically address multiple learning styles and diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result, education will finally be closer to an equitable solution to the bilingual debate, a way to best serve the needs of minority-language students.

Works Cited

“Bilingual Education Debate Misguided, Says Reason Public Policy

Institute.”

2BilingualEducationDebateMisguided,SaysReasonPublicPolicyInstitute.

RPPI/Reason Public Policy Institute 6 Feb. 2003

<<http://www.rppi.org/051898.html>>.

Corson, David. Language, Diversity, and Education. Lawrence Erlbaum

Associates: New Jersey, 2001.

Gonzalez, Gustavo, and Lento F. Maez. “Advances in Research in Bilingual

Education.” Directions in Language & Education National Clearinghouse

for Bilingual Education 1:5 (Fall 1995). 6 Feb. 2003

<<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/directions/05.htm>>

6 Feb. 2003

<<http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/directions/05.htm>> Krashen, Stephen.

“Bush’s Bad Idea for Bilingual Ed.” Rethinking Schools

Online 15.4 (Summer 2001). 6 Feb. 2003 <<http://www.rethinking>

[schools.org/archive/15_04/Bied154.shtml](http://www.rethinking)>.

Macedo, Donaldo. “English Only: The Tongue-Tying of America.” Taking Sides.

Ed. James Wm. Noll. Guilford: Duskin Publishing Group, 1993. 263-

271.

Spring, Joel. American Education. McGraw-Hill: New York, 2002.

