

## **From Bilingualism to Interlinguistics: The Case Against the Deficit Model of Language Acquisition**

Alfredo Jiménez  
Florida International University, USA

**Abstract:** The article argues against an ahistorical deficit model of Spanish/English bilingualism in educational practice based on interlinguistic research. The bidirectional facilitative effects of Hispanic bilingualism allow Spanish-speaking minorities to exploit their language background while learning academic English and integrating their language and culture into the American mainstream.

Recent unprecedented demographic events in the United States have caught both native and immigrant residents woefully unprepared to meet the challenge of educating and mainstreaming newcomers in the most efficient and painless manner. The American classroom is now a stage in which teacher and student find themselves facing each other having to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers. By 1998, over a third of the nation's public school students were of color (Valdes, 2001). Unlike past decades, linguistic minority groups have decided to break with traditional assimilationist patterns and retain as much of their cultural heritage as possible. How this was to be accomplished, especially through the educational system, is a question that has spurred much debate.

One main route to maintenance of the culture and language employed by linguistic minorities has been through bilingual/bicultural programs. The *Lau v. Nichols* decision of 1967, initiated by Filipino immigrants in California, allowed for immigrant groups with substantial numbers to receive instruction in their native language (Valdes, 2001). A wide array of programs arose under different names, such as transitional, dual, immersion, native/home language instruction—each employing the first language in varying degrees while gradually introducing English. Depending on the ultimate goal, programs were either subtractive or additive: either the native language was maintained along with English or jettisoned and forgotten.

### **From Spanish to Latin**

While the debate raged on, few, if any, educators ever questioned the practice of including a foreign language as a staple of the public school curriculum. In some schools, despite its status as a “dead” language, Latin was accepted and viewed as one of the more challenging courses high school students could take. The rewards were not only grounding in Western cultural tradition and mental discipline but the opportunity to learn about the foundational aspects of English (Cunningham & Graham, 2000). Latinists even spoke of their students' experience with “sprachgefühl,” the ability to view one's own language from a distance and thereby learning English thoroughly (Masciantonio, 1977).

Oddly, with the dramatic rise of bilingual education and the simultaneous, and largely unheralded, demise of Latin in the American curriculum, no one—neither educator nor politician—ever clamored for Spanish as Latin's successor and fill the linguistic, educational gap left in the curriculum. The “genetic” closeness of the two languages (Ard & Homburg, 1983) makes this omission all the more glaring. Hispanofiles—Spanish teachers, bilingual educators, native language proponents, even ESL and reading instructors—should have (but did not) promote the learning of the second most popular language in the world, slightly ahead of even

English (Castro, n.d.). Within the United States, Spanish is the most common language after English, its speakers numbering about 27.8 million and making it larger than all Spanish-speaking nations except four--Mexico, Columbia, Spain and Argentina (Wikipedia, n.d.).

The unexplained silence in promoting the passing of the mantel from Latinists to Hispanists has perhaps justifiably led to criticism of bilingual education proponents for their programmatic rationales and subsequent achievements (Cummins, 1979). Longitudinal studies such as the St. Lambert Project of Canada, which tracked students in a French immersion program for twelve years, were never attempted with American bilingual programs. Data on the effectiveness of bilingual programs involving students with low SES and immigrant backgrounds was never collected and analyzed to determine whether the success of the Canadian experiment could be replicated under markedly different circumstances.

### **Cultural/ Linguistic Disassociation**

The failure to promote the relationship between the teaching of Spanish and its facilitative effect on the learning of English may have been due to the nature of how academic disciplines relate to each other. In high schools, depending on the size of its language department, foreign languages may be in a separate department or even subsumed by the English department. In either case, Spanish teachers may have perceived themselves as competing with other languages, including English. Thus, the relationship may not have been one of interdisciplinary cooperation, of seeing that students benefit from globally extracting the most from all the languages offerings at school.

### **The Rise of Cross-Linguistic Research**

The unexpected influx of immigrants, particularly Spanish-speakers from Mexico and Latin America, contributed to the rise of the bilingual education movement in the United States. Other nations have faced similar situations in which neighboring countries absorbed immigrant groups that maintained a first (L1) and second (L2) language while residing in a new country offering either political or economic refuge. As these languages came into contact, the linguistic mixture created what some researchers call an “interlanguage” (Nickel, 1998). The relatively incipient, evolving field of interlinguistics has produced studies on the cross-lingual effect from one language to the other, either in a unidirection or bi-directional process—from the L1 to the L2 or vice versa. Researchers have examined various transfer effects on reading (Ringbom, 1992), vocabulary development (Ard & Homburg, 1993; Cunningham & Graham, 2000), and phonological processes (Hancin-Bhatt & Nagy, 1994; Lindsey, Manis, & Bailey, 2003).

Hispanofiles failed to appreciate the uniqueness of the Spanish/English genetic relationship that interlinguists have hinted at: the use of Latin root words from Spanish which facilitate the learning of their English equivalents. For years Latinists extolled this element of their teaching which substantiated and supported Latin’s inclusion as part of a rigorous college preparatory curriculum.

### **Cognates and Functionality: Spanish versus English**

Spanish and English have many cognates or words that share semantic and orthographic similarities in varying degrees. For instance, in Spanish the word *mansión* is written identically and means the same as the English word *mansion*. However, some cognates rely on parts of a word referred to as roots. One such example, *boca*, or mouth, is one root word which, if Spanish or bilingual teachers ever used with their students, would facilitate the teaching of the psychokinetic roots of language. Furthermore, English lacks this parallel pedagogical equivalent and monolingual English-speaking children are helplessly limited to rote memorization for

acquiring the basic, functional terms when learning to use the letters and their corresponding sounds.

To illustrate, first graders are taught that letters belong to two groups: vowels and consonants. To interlinguists, these two terms are low-frequency, or uncommon, words (Cunningham & Graham, 2000). For children, these words will perhaps always be limited to their role in remembering that the letters a-e-i-o-u are vowels and the rest are known as consonants. Few native English speakers, for that matter, may never realize that the word *vow* is related to *vowel* or that the word *consonant* can be used as an adjective.

For a child or adult learning Spanish, the word for vowels is *vocales* and for consonants, it is *consonantes*. Thus, the word *vocal*, unlike its English equivalent, relates easily to the word *boca*, or mouth. Thus, vowels are letters that essentially open the person's mouth to pronounce them. Consonants, on the other hand, are letters that close the mouth and "have sound" or are "with sound" (i.e., *con*/with + *sonar*/sound). In essence, the closing of the mouth (consonants) either with the lips, tongue, teeth, etc. combines with the opening of the mouth (vowels) to create speech. Children specifically can benefit from a physical, kinetic explication and translation of linguistic terms into palpable, demonstrable actions via common every day words. The native, monolingual speaker of English lacks this advantage which the Spanish-speaker brings to the bilingual classroom when exploring and discovering language.

### **Linguistic Symbiosis**

This unique example demonstrates not only the Spanish-speaker's linguistic advantage but reveals an important aspect of language: that no language is unrelated to another. Linguists refer to "genetic" relationships among different languages and the relatively "close distance" between Spanish and English (Ard & Homburg, 1993). Both opponents and proponents of bilingual education have allowed the emotional pitch of their arguments to drown out interlinguists' discussion about the facilitative nature of both languages. It is tragic and disappointing to see how this affects those who speak non-standard dialects. Spanglish, or code-switching from language to another, is ridiculed or disparaged by both language professionals and the public at large. Often teachers view students who speak a nonstandard dialect as a "tabula rasa" or blank sheet. Rather than focus and tap what the Spanglish-speaker brings to the classroom in both languages, they are oftentimes considered "alingual," not knowing either language at all. Ironically, these are the children who might be the most adept at grasping the concept of linguistic symbiosis as exemplified by the aforementioned *boca/vocales* lesson.

### **Cognate Recognition: Low to High Frequency Words**

Research focusing on cognate recognition offers the most promise to older secondary and adult bilingual students who may not have participated in bilingual programs. The learning of low frequency (i.e., common) English words from high frequency (common, everyday) words in Spanish allows Hispanic bilinguals the chance to increase their vocabulary inventory at an age when lexical acquisition ebbs.

For instance, the English word *limpid*, which means clear or clean, appeared on a standardized graduate school admissions test. Less than 14% of test takers answered this test item correctly. Although derived from French, the Spanish word that approximates this word is *limpio*, or clean. By using direct instruction, Hispanic bilingual high school students prepping for the SAT would see the applicability of their home language in learning academic English words. The maternal and paternal speech heard at home and on the playground since childhood thus has value in the classroom and, in the case of college bound students, in higher education. This is a rare instance in which parents can feel that everyday bilingual discourse with their children is a

resource waiting to be exploited. It reinforces learning that occurs in homes which are not necessarily of the dominant class, much less middle class or white. Educators and politicians on both sides of the language issue would have to alter their prejudices towards the term “Spanish dominant.” English language loyalists would understand, for once, that relying on a minority language does not constitute a deficit or hindrance but rather a complement to the learning of English. Linguists themselves also need to modify their L1/L2 paradigms and employ an “L<sup>o</sup>” which in math means any number (in this case, a language) taken to the zero power is the number “1.” In other words, a bilingual who acquires two languages in reality has one interlanguage which symbiotically builds upon itself. Words from one language are based, derived and generated from one language to another and cannot be said to exist independently from one another.

In addition to the symbiotic relationship, the student discovers that acquisition requires less rote memorization. There is an adage that says, “Use a word three times, and it’s yours.” Usage, in other words, leads to acquisition. For the bilingual person, the roots of academic English vocabulary were there since childhood and formed the building blocks for later demands for higher academic literacy skills. The difficulty of learning new vocabulary is demonstrated by the Educational Testing Services’ deletion of the antonym section from the SAT examination (Gose & Selingo, 2001). This portion of the test provided little chance for students to decipher meaning through contextual clues. One either knew the word or they did not. Hispanic bilinguals, because of their cultural linguistic capital, would not need clues. Further, by tapping into their native language, the acquisition of new vocabulary becomes a natural process, not artificial and temporary as when relying on mnemonic techniques. Words would flow into the bilingual’s speech and compositions, the ability to think and speak while freeing more time spent on learning difficult, non-Latin based vocabulary words (Ard & Homburg, 1993).

### **Conclusion**

Thus for the Hispanic student who has been told that his native language was a detriment, something, according to behavioral psychologists, to be extinguished because it took away from his practice time with English (Yeung, Marsh, & Suliman, 2000), the research of interlinguists dispels the notion of linguistic confusion. Now, the only confusion is amongst blanket opponents of bilingualism who fail to understand the value of Spanish. Perhaps now they can ask themselves what they expected bilingual students to do once they took high school Spanish only to find themselves, years later, struggling to speak not only in the classroom but at home with their first teachers, their parents.

For once, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans and other Spanish-speaking minorities have a legitimate reason to value and develop their linguistic capital and reject the ahistorical and politicized model of language acquisition. Against this background, thus, looms perhaps the real, sobering reason nativists ardently opposed bilingualism in general and Spanish bilingualism in particular: the fact that they, as monolinguals, would be a step behind those who once struggled to keep from falling behind. They would now see what the research would certainly support: that at least with academic vocabulary development, to learn English well, it helps to learn Spanish first and *¡ pronto!*

### **References**

Ard, J., & Homburg, T. (1993). Verification of language transfer. In S. M. Gass & L. Selinker (Eds.), *Language in transfer in language learning* (pp. 47-70). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

- Castro, M. (n.d.). *The future of Spanish in the United States*. Retrieved December 4, 2004, from <http://www.ourworld.compuserve.com>
- Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research, 49*, 222-251.
- Cunningham, T. H., & Graham, C. R. (2000). Increasing native English vocabulary through Spanish immersion: Cognate transfer from foreign to first language. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 92*, 37-49.
- Gose, B., & Selingo, J. (2001, October 26). The SAT's Greatest Test [Electronic version]. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved October 21, 2004, from <http://www.chronicle.com>
- Hancin-Bhatt, B., & Nagy, W. (1994). Lexical transfer and second language morphological development. *Applied Psycholinguistics, 15*, 289-310.
- Lindsey, K., Manis, F., & Bailey, E. (2003). Prediction of first-grade reading in Spanish-speaking English-language learners. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(3), 482-494.
- Masciantonio, R. (1977). Tangible benefits of the study of Latin: A review of research. *Foreign Language Annals, 10*, 375-382.
- Nickel, G. (1998). The role of interlanguage in foreign language teaching. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 36*, 1-7.
- Ringbom, H. (1992). On L1 transfer in L2 comprehension and L2 production. *Language learning, 42*(1), 85-112.
- Valdés, G. (2001). *Learning and not learning English: Latino students in the American schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wikipedia: The free encyclopedia. (n.d.). *Spanish in the United States*. Retrieved December 3, 2004, from <http://www.en.wikipedia.org>
- Yeung, A., Marsh, H., & Suliman, R. (2000). Can two tongues live in harmony: Analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS88) longitudinal data on the maintenance of home language. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*(4), 1001-1026.