

## Bilingual Education in the USA: A Transition to Monolingualism?

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**Abstract:** Although bilingual education has never enjoyed widespread support in the USA, several models can be distinguished for language minority students: transitional bilingual education, dual language (or two-way immersion) programs, and speech community models. In this literature review, these models are examined to determine which is the most effective.

“Bilingual education has never enjoyed widespread support in the USA” (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007, p. 2). There has always been an explicit attack on bilingual education attempts. The bilingual educational practices that had started in the country during the 1840s to respond to the presence of many school children that spoke German, Dutch, French, Spanish, and Swedish were unfortunately (and since then) brought to a halt due to the nativism of World War I and to popular reaction to the large number of non-English speaking immigrants entering the country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It was only in the 1960s that, due to a renewed interest in language minority rights, Congress passed Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1968, also known as the Bilingual Education Act. This Act “was extended to meet the needs of all children who spoke a language other than English in the home and who had an economic need” (Torres-Guzmán & Etxeberria, 2005, p. 515).

In 1974, the Supreme Court of the USA in *Lau v. Nichols* dictated that public schools offer special programs for students who spoke little or no English. The Bilingual Education Act was reduced to English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, with content instruction in the first language for three years. “By 1974 the Bilingual Education Act had narrowed the goal of bilingual education to the teaching of English to those who were ‘limited English speakers’ and explicitly promoted what was defined as *transitional bilingual education*” (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007, p. 2).

Although transitional bilingual education was clearly under attack during the 1990s, in 1993, 43 states and the District of Columbia had legislative provisions and appropriated funding for bilingual and ESL programs. This decade seems to be the harshest one for bilingual educational practices, as “many Americans argued that immigrants should drop their first languages and assimilate to the USA through English monolingualism” (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007, p. 3).

In the state of California, for instance, there was the English Only movement. According to Jenkins (2003), in 1998:

The English Language Education for Children in Public Schools Initiative (more commonly known as Proposition 227) was passed, requiring all children for whom English was not their first language (L1) to be placed in immersion programmes for a year and then to be transferred to mainstream education. Given that the language of the environment is English and the aim to subtract rather than add a language (i.e. subtractive rather than additive bilingualism), it would be more appropriate to describe these programmes as ‘submersion’ (Richard Watts, personal communication). (p. 95)

It should be said that these policies are fueled by the fear of bilingualism among the largely monolingual L1 English population, resulting from the dramatic increase in multi-ethnicity due to the large number of immigrants. “By 2001, the white population of California had fallen to below half the state’s total population of 34 million” (Jenkins, 2003, p. 94.). The largest overall increase in the population of immigrants, in California and in the U.S.A. in general, is among people from Hispanic backgrounds (Jenkins, 2003).

In 2002, the Bilingual Education Act was eliminated as part of the authorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Its successor, Title III of NCLB, is called ‘Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students’. Garcia (2005) describes the changes taking place:

Whereas the 1994 version of the Bilingual Education Act included among its goals ‘developing the English skills... and to the extent possible, the native-language skills’ of LEP (Limited English Proficiency) students, the new law stresses skills in English only. The word bilingual has been completely eliminated from the law. (p. 98)

Today, the situation could not be more disheartening. States like California, Massachusetts and Arizona have already declared bilingual education illegal. As a result of federal pressure to demonstrate content-area knowledge in English, “traditional comprehensive high school bilingual programmes have resolved to dedicate less time to instruction in languages other than English” (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, ESL instruction practices in the most popular ‘bilingual’ program (the ESL pull-out model, which we will be looking at in the next section) linguistically segregate learners of English.

#### **Bilingual Education Models in the USA**

Within a general theoretical framework, we can think of bilingual education models in the USA as being in a continuum with two extremes: compensatory models versus enrichment models (of dual language instruction). “At one extreme we have monolingual/monocultural models that view second language teaching and learning as compensatory education to overcome the “problem” of lack of language proficiency among language minority students” (Kerper & Wink, 2001, p. 439). In this model, the use of students’ L1 is minimal and even restricted, as in the case of California’s Proposition 227, which passed in 1998 and required that instruction in L1 of limited English proficient students be replaced by a one year program of intensive English language instruction labeled ‘structured English immersion’ (SEI). The other extreme includes “approaches to dual language program design that view second language learning as enrichment that provides clear advantages to students in attaining high levels of academic achievement, with eventual benefits in expanded career choices and economic opportunities” (Kerper & Wink, 2001, p. 439). The most popular model of bilingual education in the U.S., that of *transitional bilingual education*, is somewhere in the middle of the continuum, as it is intended as a compensatory model that also provides the benefits of L1 language and literacy skills. To what extent language and literacy skills in L1 are developed in transitional bilingual education programs is an arguable, delicate matter.

It should be said that the English as a second language (ESL) pull-out model, in which a small number of students are taken out of their regular classroom by a teacher who will get them to work on their English language skills, is NOT considered a bilingual education model “because there is no use of the native language for instruction” (Hornberger, 1990, in Torres-Guzmán et al., 2005, p. 516).

As noted above, the most popular form of bilingual education in the USA is the *transitional bilingual education* program (TBE) (Torres-Guzmán et al., 2005, p. 516). In this

program, instruction is in both the native language (of minority students) and English for a period of three years. This means that L1 is phased out as proficiency in L2 increases. The criteria to exit students from the program are usually established by a second language proficiency and achievement test. If we are wondering how in this model proficiency in L1 can still be maintained once English has taken over and has become the exclusive medium of instruction (in other words, the goal), there is the *maintenance/enrichment model* of bilingual education program geared for both language majority and minority students in which both L1 and L2 are used as medium of instruction for a longer period (usually K-6 instead of K-3 in TBE). We can already see an advantage to this form of bilingual program, as “language is acquired best when it is the medium of instruction, not solely as the object of instruction” (Kerper & Wink, 2001, p. 440).

Then, there are the *dual language (DL)* programs, also called *two-way immersion (TWI)* programs. These are geared towards both language majority and minority students. Garcia (2005) offers a good account of the goals of dual language programs: basically, teaching content IN BOTH LANGUAGES, with teachers adapting their lessons to convey vocabulary and language structure, language minority students and English-speaking students are given the opportunity to learn a second language. Cross-cultural awareness is also aimed for by having a population of half language minority students and half English-speaking students in each classroom.

There are two basic models of dual language programs: the 90/10 model and the 50/50 model. In the 90/10 model, it is the English speakers who experience full immersion in the minority language while minority language speakers go through a maintenance and heritage enrichment program. In the 50/50 model, also known as ‘partial immersion’ model, at least 50% of the time the instruction is in the minority language. This model is preferred in the East Coast of the U.S.A. Of the 103 partial immersion models identified, 99 are Spanish/English programs, 1 is Chinese, 2 are French, and 1 is Navajo. We have gone a long way, as we can see, from the ESL pull-out model or the transitional bilingual model. No matter if the two-way immersion is in a 90/10 or 50/50 model, children are not linguistically segregated. Through exposure to two different languages, two different language populations work together to overcome their difficulties. This way, they learn that one language is just as valid as the other. This simplest of concepts is somehow at the other end of the compensatory perspective (deeply rooted within the American educational language policy system) with monolingualism in English as its main goal and is, instead, very much in tune with a linguistic human rights perspective. “A linguistic-human rights orientation implies that everyone can identify positively with his or her native language and expect to have that identification accepted and respected by others” (Kerper & Wink, 2001, p. 441). There are approximately 266 documented two-way immersion programs in the USA (Fregel, 2003). The first implemented model was Miami-Dade’s Coral Way Elementary School in Florida, in the 1960s. Other successful examples of such a model include: Cali Calimecac Charter School in Windsor, California; the schools in the San Diego School District in California; and the Alianza Elementary School in Watsonville, California.

There is, still, a model that some might consider anachronistic, which offers great contrast to the ones mentioned before (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007). Gregorio Luperón High School in Washington Heights, New York City, which was founded in 1991, functions as a *speech community model* of bilingual education. It is a community high school, a community-based organization and thus a community model since it was born “to develop a solution to the high failure rates of newcomer Dominican youth in New York City high schools” (Garcia & Bartlett,

2007, p. 7). It is, therefore, a school that serves the community of Dominicans in New York City, the second largest Latino group and the poorest of all ethnic and racial groups in the city.

Some of the main characteristics of this model are: the absence of students who are native speakers of English; the presence of native Spanish-speaking Latino teachers as models (which contribute to the high status of Spanish); specific English language acquisition targets (mainly preparation for the English Regents Exam); the use of bilingualism as a pedagogical strategy, translation practices, metalinguistic talk and cross-cultural reflections; the use of Spanish for instruction and connection (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007). This model is a hybrid of *maintenance* and *transitional* bilingual education programs. The focus on the Spanish-speaking children, and the use of Spanish as a language to educate and to be developed are traits of maintenance bilingual education programs. The attention to the students' acquisition of English (with the two languages frequently used in some combination) is a transitional bilingual education model characteristic. Learning L2 without necessarily losing L1 should be a simple goal, yet it is a difficult one to achieve in the context of the US. The community of Dominicans that attend Gregorio Luperón High School in Washington Heights will definitely not lose their Spanish. How proficient they will become in their social and academic use of English is the question. Let us, then, examine some of the advantages and disadvantages of the models previously described.

#### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Bilingual Education Models**

The *transitional bilingual education* model has proficiency in English as its main goal (Kerper & Wink, 2001). Although L1 (for language minority students) is used as a medium of instruction, a very positive side to it, it is used for a very short period (usually K-3) and phased out as proficiency in L2 increases and, ultimately, L2 becomes the exclusive medium of instruction. In this sense, the *maintenance/enrichment bilingual education* model offers more time of L1 as a medium of instruction (K-6) and thus fosters positive cross-cultural relations (Kerper & Wink, 2001). However, in any transitional model, the question is how to maintain proficiency in L1. As we have seen, this model is within the compensatory perspective of bilingual education, which views the lack of proficiency in L2 as a *problem* and thus proficiency in English as the main goal.

*Dual language, or two-way immersion (TWI)*, education programs have proven to be more efficient than the previously mentioned transitional models (Frengel, 2003; Kerper & Wink, 2001). To start with, dual language programs favor integration of ESL learners with English-speaking peers and thus foster positive cross-cultural relations. As Frengel (2003) points out, "one of the key components of a TWI program is that children work side by side with one another and see each other as assets who can help with the unfamiliar language" (p. 56). This setting has little to do with the popular ESL pull-out model. As a result of this simplest of conceptions –children from two different language backgrounds working side by side with one another, "children learn that success comes through cooperation rather than competition" (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998).

In terms of literacy maintenance (of L1) and academic performance (of both language majority and minority students), the review of the literature on these programs shows that TWI programs are among the most successful in achieving the goal of teaching English to language-minority students AND maintaining literacy in their home language. There is also evidence that test scores for students undergoing TWI programs are at or above national averages.

Language minority students who go through this kind of program are also less likely to drop out before graduation. Children in general demonstrate "increased feelings of success, enjoyment of the learning process, and self-esteem" (Love & Love, 1995). According to Kenrick

et al. (1998), the learning atmosphere created in cooperative classrooms can definitely help in the fight against negative prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination.

In spite of addressing the *social* nature of second language acquisition (SLA), the speech community model “leads to the formation of stereotypes which remain unchallenged” (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007, p. 20) probably due to the social isolation in which these students find themselves. There are, however, some positive aspects and conceptions of the speech community model. It takes into account the concepts of scholars like Canagarajah (1999), Pennycook (1994), Phillipson (1992) and others that point to the sociolinguistic and socio-historical contexts of the teaching and learning of English or to the resistance to linguistic imperialism in English teaching. It is this *social* focus that gives this model its relevance and importance. According to Garcia (2007), traditional individual models of SLA have ignored three wider, social aspects of L2 learning: the role of communities of practice, social identities issues when learning L2, and the influence of power relations on linguistic interaction. The schooling at Gregorio Luperón High School in Washington Heights, a speech community model of bilingual education, takes into account the communities in which these adolescents live and communicate, their social identities as Spanish-speaking immigrants who are learning English, and the power relations between their poor community and the larger English-speaking New York City. No matter how socially aware the groundings for such a model are, studies have revealed that segregation contributes to some limitations, such as “the limited range of English for these students, the lack of experience with other cultural groups and the potential for the formation of stereotypes” (Garcia & Bartlett, 2007, p. 20).

We could only hope for more socially aware conceptions of dual-language or two way immersion programs in the USA, which seem to be more effective than the transitional bilingual education or speech community models for both language minority and language majority students. The time of globalization is pushing more and more for bilingual and multilingual societies. Schools in those societies should contribute to the formation of positive cross-cultural relations. A linguistic human rights orientation is important, then, in the sense that language minority students can manage to preserve their linguistic identity and can have that identity accepted and respected by others. Two goals are thus accomplished: one- linguistic; the other- social.

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