

The Effects of Proper Implementation of Bilingual Programs in Elementary Schools in the United States

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Abstract: Americans' support of bilingual education has been closely linked with the immigration sentiments of the times. Current anti-immigrant feelings on bilingualism have intensified its negative connotation and effectiveness in English language acquisition. Improper implementation of bilingual programs has also fueled this misconception. This literature will challenge these misconceptions.

The following literature review shows the historical trends towards bilingualism in the United States. It also reviews both quantitative and qualitative studies to discuss the types of bilingual programs, the benefits of these programs, and the contribution of their proper implementation in elementary schools across the country to students' success in standardized tests.

Historical Trends Towards Bilingualism in the United States

Since its beginnings, the United States has always been a melting pot of different languages and cultures. The American Revolution brought with it the no official language policy. "Evidence suggests that the framers of the U.S. Constitution believed that in a democracy, government should leave language choices up to the people" (Crawford, 1999, p. 22). However, from 1790 to 1815 the English language usage continued to expand. Military conflicts in Europe and a higher effort to check emigration led to a decline of colonial languages (French, Dutch, and German). By the mid 1830s, new waves of European immigrants led to a new wave of bilingual education as "bilingual education was likely to be accepted in areas where language minority groups had influence" (Crawford, 1999, p. 23). By the late 19th century, nationalism led to a decline once more of bilingual education in the country. As Italian, Jewish, and Slav immigrants arrived, anti-immigrants sentiments grew. These new immigrants were viewed negatively because of their different manners and ways of life. In 1906, the first federal language law was passed requiring English for naturalization purposes. Bilingual education continued to decline as the United States entered World War I and states began to pass laws for English as the basic language of instruction. Despite the fact that by 1923 legislation for English only laws started to decline, U.S. public opinion had already experienced a dramatic change. "Learning in language other than English...seemed less than patriotic...minority tongues were devalued in the eyes of younger generations" (Crawford, 1999, p. 29). Nonetheless, Bilingual education was revived by the Cubans who immigrated to Miami after the 1959 revolution in their home country. The Federal Cuban Refugee Program provided subsidies, which enabled the Dade County Public School System to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. In 1961, it created the Spanish for Spanish speaker classes. In 1963, Dade County Public School System created the first Bilingual Program, Coral Way Model, in the United States since 1920. Although, the federal and state aid to the program was viewed as a relief poverty measure, it showed the feasibility of bilingual education. Schools around the country started to implement some variations of the Coral Way Model. The U.S. government decision to view the program as a poverty aid rather

than as a language instruction program would lead to controversy and debates about the implementation of such programs (Crawford, 1999).

In recent years, new anti-immigrants sentiments and English only movements have led to an attack on bilingualism in the United States once again. Bilingual education is experiencing rejection at all levels of society (Weber, 2006). Bilingual states, such as California and Arizona, with multicultural populations that speak different languages have implemented anti-bilingual laws, such as Proposition 227 and Proposition 203 respectively in order to eliminate bilingual programs from elementary schools. Other states like Florida have proposed initiatives to reduce reading teachers' training hours in English for Speakers of Other Languages. In addition to anti-immigrant feelings, another reason for this negative trend towards bilingualism is the lack of awareness of the American public and legislators about the benefits of speaking more than one language. Furthermore, government policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act require English Language Learners (ELLs) to be included in statewide-standardized tests making the proper implementation of bilingual programs at the elementary level even more necessary. Although, this policy requires accommodations for ELLs at the time of the test, the overall curriculum and instruction is still provided in English. Bilingual programs, if implemented properly, alleviate these burdens and thus help improve performance in standardized tests.

Furthermore, most Americans are unaware of the importance that bilingualism plays in shaping the culture of the United States. In many cases, Americans view bilingualism as a threat to the English language. One of the myths about bilingualism in this country is that "bilingual education prevents children from acquiring English" (Krashen, 2006, p. 3). While some bilingual programs do encourage development of a student's native language after English has been mastered, the major goal of bilingual education is the rapid acquisition of English and the mastery of academic subjects. Besides viewing bilingual education as a threat to the English language, most Americans do not understand the literal meaning of bilingualism, which is "an instructional approach that uses the child's native language (L1) to make instruction of second language (L2) meaningful" (Lopez & Tashakkori, 2006, p. 124). For example, some Americans believe that bilingual programs teach only the native language. On the contrary, in properly organized bilingual programs, English is introduced immediately. Additionally, "scientific" theories, such as the *off-balance theory*, which states that "the more a person learns of one language, the less knowledge he or she can hold of another" (Chipongian, 2000, p. 1), further support these myths against bilingualism.

On the other hand, recent studies "generally conclude that, over the long term, non-English speaking children placed in bilingual programs in the early elementary grades perform as well as or better than children not placed in these programs" (Garcia, 2005, p. 160). Therefore, these students perform better in standardized tests in upper grades. Their literacy in L1 strongly influences their acquisition of L2. It is important to note that the success of bilingual programs in elementary schools is strongly linked to the way that the bilingual program is implemented in that particular school. Besides, "recent research has demonstrated that positive cognitive gains are associated with learning a second language in childhood" (Chipongian, 2000, p. 1), which supports once again the implementation of bilingual programs in elementary schools.

Types of Bilingual Programs

There are different types of bilingual programs. Two of the most widely implemented bilingual programs are the Two-Way Bilingual programs (TWBE) or Two-Way Immersion and the Transitional Bilingual programs (TBE). In the TWBE program, students receive instruction in both languages throughout their elementary school years, while in TBE programs, instruction

in the native language ends once the students achieve a level 3 English proficiency. TWBE has different program designs, but two of the most common are 90/10 and the 50/50. “In the 90/10 students receive their instruction in L1 until third grade when English literacy is introduced. Students in a 50/50 model receive their literacy instruction simultaneously in both languages” (De Jong, 2002, p. 2). In other words, in the 90/10 model, 90% of the instruction is received in the minority native language until third grade when the 10% instruction in English is introduced. In the 50/50 model, on the other hand, 50% of the literacy instruction is received in the minority language and 50% is received in English.

Quantitative and Qualitative Research and the Success of Bilingualism in Elementary Schools

One of the most studied schools that successfully implement the TWBE program is the Oyster School in Washington, D.C. According to a research study done in 2000 by Hornberger and Skilton-Silvester, it is important to value the knowledge and values that students from different educational, sociolinguistic, and socioeconomic class bring to school. Therefore, Oyster’s bilingual program has succeeded because as Freeman’s research showed, it values students with different perspectives and experiences (Garcia, 2005). In addition, their follow up of the students, who transition from the program, show the students’ academic success in later years. Further research of this particular school also indicates that schools that do not follow the dual bilingual program may produce students who experience difficulties in mainstream classes because they do not share the values and knowledge of the mainstream students (Garcia, 2005).

Research “shows that a good foundation in the child’s first language, both at home and at school may be more important for long term success in the second language than an early start in the second language itself” (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 186), which is the key element of implementing bilingual programs at the elementary level rather than total immersion programs. The sooner students are exposed to dual-language programs, the higher their success rate at upper grades and, thus, at standardized tests. In light of this theory, Lopez and Tashakkori (2006) did a quantitative study of six bilingual schools using both the TWBE and the TBE model designs for literacy instruction. The study was conducted over a 1-year period and involved 553 fifth grade students. The students were classified as ESOL and as non-ESOL within the bilingual programs. The main aim of this study was to determine the long-term effect of the two bilingual programs in the ESOL students’ academic performance and attitudes. As Table 1 clearly shows, ESOL level 3 students enrolled in TWBE programs outperformed non-ESOL students enrolled in the same program in the FCAT (Florida Comprehension Assessment Test) Reading section.

Table 1
Academic Achievement as Measure by the FCAT

	FCAT Reading (%)		FCAT Math (%)		FCAT Science (%)		Sample Size	
	TWBE	TBE	TWBE	TBE	TWBE	TBE	TWBE	TBE
ESOL Level 3	51.3	46.16	55.97	32.84	52.05	54.90	39	20
ESOL Level 4	43.10	54.90	56.91	41.77	50.73	34.17	31	82
Non ESOL	50.27	49.88	49.88	47.58	55.25	43.78	106	259

Note: ESOL levels are from 1-4 (for simplification purposes only levels 3 and 4 were stated). Adapted from “Differential Outcomes of Two Bilingual Education Programs on English Language Learners,” by Lopez and Tashakkori, 2006, *Bilingual Research Journal*, 30, p. 132.

In addition, ESOL TWBE students in levels 3 and 4 also outperformed non-ESOL students in the FCAT Math section. The table also shows that TBE ESOL students in level 3 scored almost 10 percent higher in science than non-ESOL students. The proper implementation of both programs has contributed to a reduction of the gap between ESOL and non-ESOL students in academic achievement. Overall, Lopez and Tashakkori (2006) concluded that, “L1 instruction accelerated the rate of L2 acquisition in the L2, while facilitating the maintenance and development of literacy skills in the L1” (p. 138).

Other researchers, such as Ester J. De Jong (2002) from the University of Florida, also show the success of bilingual students in standardized tests. In her study, the unit of analysis is the Barbieri School Bilingual program located in Framingham, MA. In this particular school, the TWBE program enrolls 128 English speakers and 130 Spanish native speakers from K-5. One of the key characteristics of this particular study is that the Barbieri bilingual program implements both systems of TWBE programs.

At the beginning grades, native Spanish speakers receive all instruction in Spanish except for specials (music, art, and physical education) and the native English speakers receive about 40% of their instruction in Spanish. In this way, Spanish instruction is reinforced for both groups. The emphasis on literacy and math reduces the amount of time spent in the second language in grades 1 and 2 to around 30% for each group. As of third grade, all students receive 50% of their instruction in their native language and 50% in their second language. (De Jong, 2002, p. 3)

The results of this program’s implementation were astounding. In the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems Test, which is an equivalent of Florida’s FCAT examination, Barbieri’s fourth grade students’ average scores for Language Arts are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Average Scale Scores on the Fourth Grade MCAS for the Year 2000 in Language Arts

	Barbieri	District	State
	Points %	Points %	Points %
English Speakers	236 56	247 58	234 55
Spanish Speakers	228 54	223 53	221 53

Note: Adapted from “Effective Bilingual Education: From Theory to Academic Achievement in a Two-Way Bilingual Program,” by De Jong, 2002, *Bilingual Research Journal*, 26, p. 14.

As the table 2 clearly shows, in 2000 Barbieri’s English speakers outperformed the state’s schools. Spanish speakers also outperformed the state and district students in Language Arts. This example once again illustrates how the proper implementation of bilingual programs translates into effective practices and increases students’ achievement. Although it may be argued that Spanish speakers still performed at a lower level compared to their English speaker counterparts, the gap between them is minimal compared to ELLs in a regular non-bilingual program. For example, research studies show that “recent meta-analysis of 17 studies of K-12 program effectiveness with ELL students...found no advantage for all-English instruction” (Barnett et al., 2007, p. 278).

The importance of this particular study lies in the fact that “the Barbieri TWBE program operates in a context that values bilingualism and benefits from longevity and stability, well-

trained and certified teaching and support staff, clear curriculum guidelines, and explicit academic, linguistic, and socio-cultural goals” (De Jong, 2000, p. 16). Similar to Barbieri’s bilingual program in Massachusetts, Davis Bilingual Magnet School in Tucson, Arizona, is another clear example of the proper implementation of bilingual programs and their contribution to the success of ELLs in standardized tests. At Davis Bilingual Magnet Schools, students receive instruction only in Spanish for the first two years (K-1). The use of English increases in subsequent years, but never exceeds a 30% rate as language of instruction. The effectiveness of the DLI model at Davis school was clearly seen in the 1999 Stanford 9 standardized achievement test results. These results showed that the first generation of Davis students under this program, from Kindergarten to fifth grade, scored at or above the national averages in all the categories (Moll & Gonzalez, 2000). Moreover, regardless of the fact that 70% of Davis third grade students’ instruction is in Spanish, they met or exceeded the state standards in English reading on the Arizona Instrument for Measuring Standards. A current analysis for recent data is underway (Smith et al., 2002).

Alternatively, qualitative data shows that the elimination of bilingual programs can be detrimental to the acquisition process of ELLs. For example, in Arizona, with the implementation of Proposition 203, many bilingual programs have been eliminated. This elimination has led to a reduction in the quality of bilingual education and improper implementation of bilingual programs. In their study of the impact of the implementation of Proposition 203 in Arizona, Wright and Choi (2002) noted that prior to Proposition 203, 27 schools offered bilingual education. Today raw data shows that nine schools offer bilingual education. However, out of these nine schools, only four offer “bilingual education,” in the traditional sense (substantial content area and literacy in the students’ native language). In addition, the ones that offer bilingual education in the traditional sense do not offer enough instruction in the students’ native language because they are required to offer English language arts curriculum and prepare students for English only high stakes tests. Therefore, these classrooms are “not serving ELL students with low levels of English proficiency” (i.e., the ones for whom bilingual education was intended) (p. 21).

Moreover, in their research study, Wright and Choi (2002) stated that high stakes English-only testing has not improved the education of ELLs in Arizona. On the contrary, “Math and Reading scores have declined statewide for ELLs as a group, the gap between ELL students and their English-fluent peers has not narrowed” (Wright & Choi, 2002, p. 45). It is important to emphasize that according to research, assessing should be done in the children’s stronger language to avoid misdiagnosis and misplacements of students. Due to the feasibility and availability of high stakes tests in English, bilingual children are assessed in their weakest language (English). Therefore, their learning abilities and capabilities are underestimated and they are constantly misplaced (Baker, 2006). This leads to a traditional misplacement of bilingual students.

In his study, Solórzano (2008) clearly stated the importance of defining the purpose of high stakes achievement tests for ELLs and creating adequate programs tailored to benefit ELLs instruction in the English language. “In many cases, standardized tests for this student population are used for multiple purposes. One in particular is to diagnose English language proficiency. And this is problematic” (Solórzano, 2008, p. 285). According to Solórzano, high stakes tests used to diagnose English language proficiency can be misleading because they do not take into account the special needs of ELLs and their language proficiency levels. He recommends that the validity of these results should be re-evaluated to measure adequately ELLs performance.

Besides helping ELLs succeed in high stakes tests, research has also shown that bilingual programs also help students “to add English to their linguistic repertoire...while promoting tolerance and cultural pluralism” (Fitts, 2006, p. 339). In his study, Fitts used data collected for a year at the Secular Bilingual Pine Mountain in Colorado, which implements a well-established bilingual program. Unlike previous studies, Fitts studied the socio-cultural aspects of bilingualism and how it promotes and perpetuates diversity among students and teachers. Fitts (2006) also noted the misconception in mainstream America of the definition of bilingualism when he stated that in Colorado “the popular imagination, bilingual means monolingual Spanish speaking, and a bilingual school is a place to teach native Spanish speakers English” (p. 347).

Conclusion and Future Research

Researchers have approached the study of bilingualism in different ways, but their studies all show the important role that bilingualism plays in the educational system of the United States. Bilingualism helps students succeed not only in high stakes tests, but also in their daily life. It is imperative that teachers, legislators, and the public arrive at an understanding about bilingualism and how it helps all students in their performance on high stakes tests. Bilingualism is an asset, not a weakness. As Leistyna (2002) states, “it is important for educators to understand and explore psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of language acquisition and cultural identity” (p. 224). Many teachers are not aware of all the different bilingual programs available. Moreover, native speaker students do not understand the meaning of bilingualism. As noted by Butler and Gutierrez (2003) in their study about students’ perception of bilingualism, “notably, the majority of our native readers did not know what ‘bilingual’ meant, so the interviewer had to explain this term” (p. 178). Future research needs to focus on providing students and teachers opportunities to learn about all the different applications of bilingualism, as well as, to provide them with the resources necessary to help the implementation of bilingual programs succeed.

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