A Brief History of Bilingual Education in the United States

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- Bilingual education is beset with a great deal of controversy. At the root of the matter is the lack of understanding that the general public has about the benefits of native language instruction.

In 1968 Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act. Thirty-eight years later, the controversy over bilingual education continues to surge. The debate is beset with the political rhetoric of competing ideologies concerning the issue of cultural assimilation versus cultural pluralism (Crawford, 1999). The tenets of cultural assimilation hold that the United States is a melting pot of cultures. The contention with respect to American tradition is that immigrants have always blended in or conformed to American culture. Such a view is one that sees the nation as a monolingual society. Assimilationists assert that in order to achieve academic success, students of linguistically diverse backgrounds must learn English as quickly as possible. What emerges is a belief that English should be the only language of instruction.

On the other hand, those who believe in cultural pluralism maintain that American education should be characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. The contention is that since its inception, ours has been a multicultural/multilingual nation. Such sentiment reflects the history of American bilingual education. For example, bilingual education was widespread during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Amish, Cherokee, Chinese, German, and Japanese communities (Brice-Heath, 1989).

Knowledge of multiple languages was valued and recognized in education. In 1870, for example, the US Commissioner of Education stated: "The German language has actually become the second language of our Republic, and a knowledge of German is now considered essential to a finished education" (cited in Zeydel, 1964, p. 345).

In 1920 the program of Americanization initiated repressive actions against Chinese, German, and Japanese speakers. The Period from 1920 through the 1940’s marks the end of a multilingual American tradition. The growing xenophobia of the times was instrumental in changing the face of American bilingual education.

As interesting as the history of American bilingual education may be, the political dialogue which surrounds it offers no practical solutions to the question- How can bilingual programs provide the kind of quality education that limited English proficient (LEP) students need to achieve academically? The political debate serves to undermine what fifty years of research in the fields of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics tells us about linguistic and cognitive development and academic achievement (see Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Practical implementation of the philosophy that guides this research is fundamental to effective instruction.

In my years of professional involvement with the public schools and community leaders, I have found that there is much confusion about "what works" in the bilingual classroom. For example, a commonly held belief is that non-English speakers need to learn English as quickly as possible if they are to achieve academically. Consequently, in many bilingual programs LEP students who enter school with limited (or no) reading ability in their dominant or native language (L1) are taught to read and write in English (i.e., beginning readers in grades K-3 and low ability readers in grades 4-12). Nevertheless, much of the research demonstrates that such practice delays, rather than enhances, their acquisition of English, and interferes with cognitive and linguistic development (Cummins, 1994, 1998; Thonis, 1994; Baecher & Colletti, 1996; Fulton-Scott & Calvin, 1983; Moll & Diaz, 1983). As such, students fail to develop the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills they need to successfully perform in an academic environment.

It is my belief that researchers in the field of education should play an active role in informing the
public (i.e., the political community and the schools) about practical theories of cognitive development and principles of language learning and teaching. In sharing our understandings with the community, we can help our local schools to organize bilingual programs that result in positive cognitive effects and linguistic achievement. What follows is a brief discussion of the research literature from which we can obtain practical solutions to the problem of bilingual instructional organization.

Research suggests that all effective instruction of non-native speakers of English recognizes and values the role that native language plays in cognitive development. Such a philosophical framework is not limited to bilingual instruction. For example, in the case of monolingual English speaking students, the native language (English) is used as the language of instruction. A sociocultural view of cognitive development posits that children learn by participating in social activities where they interact with others (i.e., adults and other children) in the language of competence (L1) (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory can be applied to the problem of how LEP students can best acquire the skills they need to perform competently in academic tasks involving text.

The premise is that children develop reading and writing skills by interacting with competent adults in the dominant or native language (L1) in activities organized around L1 text. The research suggests that a majority of those LEP students who attain English proficiency and academic success develop adequate literacy skills in the native language, either prior to, or concurrent with, English reading and content area instruction. The research provides convincing evidence that students benefit when they learn to read in L1.

A number of investigations demonstrate that there is a significant correlation between L1 reading competence and L2 reading comprehension growth. The work of Modiano (1973) is of particular importance because it affirms the universality of the notion that a relationship exists between native language competence and second language acquisition. This early study focuses not on LEP students in the US, but on limited-Spanish proficient (LSP) students of Indian background in the Chiapas Highlands of Mexico. Modiano compared L2 reading scores of high and low ability L1 readers over a period of several years. LSP students who scored high in L1 reading comprehension tests upon entering school experienced greater growth rates in second language (L2) reading comprehension than those who entered school with low (or no) reading abilities in the dominant language.

Other investigations examine the problem of prerequisites for successful L2 reading instruction. Their findings coincide with Modiano's (1973) conclusions (e.g., Cummins, 1984; 1998; Thonis, 1994). In a study of Spanish-dominant LEP students (Cummins, 1984), children who were instructed in L1 reading for one hour per day scored significantly higher in Spanish and English reading tests than those instructed solely in English reading. Cummins concurs that students who are competent L1 readers perform better in L2 reading comprehension tests over those who are not competent L1 readers.

Cummins (1994) refers to this phenomenon as the linguistic interdependence principle. He explains:

What this principle means is that in, for example, a Spanish-English bilingual program, Spanish instruction that develops Spanish reading and writing skills is not just developing Spanish skills, it is also developing a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency that is strongly related to the development of literacy in the majority language (English). In other words, although the surface aspects (e.g., pronunciation, fluency) of different languages are clearly separate, there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency which is across languages. This “common underlying proficiency” makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy related skills across languages. (p.19)

Others (Clarke, 1979, 1980; Hudson, 1982) argue for sufficient proficiency in the second language as the basis for successful L2 reading. Clarke explains that insufficient knowledge of the language structures and failure to recognize the meanings of words result in a “short circuiting” effect. Consequently, high level L1 readers who lack L2 proficiency may not comprehend and thus fail to successfully complete tasks involving L2 text. Mace-Matluck (1985) found that high ability L1 readers achieve equivalent levels in L2 reading only when adequate face-to-face communicative skills have been mastered.

As such, achievement in L2 reading is contingent upon two factors: the students’ reading skills in L1 and their oral skills in L2 (Moll & Díaz, 1983). Specifically, native language/literacy competence is critical to L2 reading achievement because it allows the student to transfer reading skills developed in L1 to L2 reading practice (Cummins, 1994). In addition, limited L2 proficiency can result in the inability of a good L1 reader to transfer L1 literacy skills to L2 reading, as the LEP student may be too involved in decoding to apply good reading strategies which they have in L1 (Clarke, 1979, 1980; Hudson, 1982).
Despite all that is known about the prerequisites for effective bilingual instruction, a disproportionate number of LEP students fail academically. Academic failure is in part due to premature entry into L2 reading instruction where L1 skills are not yet strong enough to transfer to L2 practice (Thonis, 1994). An effective bilingual program recognizes that literacy skills are best developed in the dominant language. Reading is a language-dependent skill which requires adequate knowledge of language structures, as well as word recognition. When the student is primarily exposed to L1 oral and literacy skills within the home and community, it is inevitable that such students will experience higher success rates in cognitive and literacy achievement in the language with which they are most actively engaged (Thonis, 1994). Eleanor Thonis explains that:

If students cannot speak a language and use its vocabulary, syntax, and functional grammar at the approximate level of a six-and-one-half-year-old child learning to read that language will be difficult. If they are not encouraged to develop at least one language fully across all four modalities of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, then a functional illiteracy may be the unfortunate result. (pp.165-202)

In summary, the research suggests that effective bilingual programs adhere to the notion that LEP students must develop adequate reading skills in the dominant language and basic interpersonal communicative skills (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills [BICS]; Cummins, 1994) in English to successfully complete English language reading tasks; and finally, to achieve academically (Cummins, 1994; Baecher & Colletti, 1986; Fulton-Scott & Calvin, 1983). While it is important for students to learn English, it must not be done at the expense of cognitive development and academic achievement. Nevertheless, many students who are not yet proficient in English are taught to read and write English. At the root of the problem is the lack of articulation between the university research community, the political community, and the schools. It is my belief that we must collaborate to re-establish suitable goals for bilingual education. The time has come for us to begin a dialogue with our community concerning the issues of bilingual education.

What is the role of the research community within the context of this dialogue? I maintain that the exchange should focus, not on political ideologies concerned with cultural assimilation and cultural pluralism, but on what we know (or what the research tells us) about how to organize bilingual programs for success.

References


