

Bilingual Education: Talking Points

By J. David Ramirez

The question of how to best educate students with limited or no English language skills is critical. Current discussion on whether these children should receive instruction in their primary language is intense and often heated. Indeed, such exchanges have become a national debate.

Knowledge and a critical appraisal of the history of language policy in the United States and of what research tells us about how quickly children develop first and second language skills leads one to conclude that these exchanges are not mere reflections of differences in pedagogical approaches. They represent a deeper historical pattern of struggle over social, economic and political power, e.g., the desire to dominate on the basis of language, language proficiency, ethnicity, race and/or gender. Language policy has been and continues to be used as a more socially acceptable surrogate for overt racism (Wiley, in press). Even the motivation and context for research has been seriously questioned for political undertones (Secada, 1993).

Exchanges regarding language of instruction are largely not about differences in pedagogy, but, perhaps, about the very nature of whether we, as a society, really commit ourselves to continue our "grand experiment" in democracy. This experiment has not yet created the conditions for full democratic participation by all members in our communities, but perpetuates traditional inequities in distribution of power, e.g., resources, decision-making and well-being, among diverse groups within our society. Explication of these conditions is beyond the scope of this article, but it is provided elsewhere (Orfield, 1997; Nakagawa, 1996; Wiley, in press; Crawford, 1992; Rickford, 1997). The intent of this article is to directly address some of the more blatant misinformation proffered by members of the English-only movement, the current standard bearers for maintaining the inequitable and undemocratic status quo.

It is important that I begin by clarifying terms. First the term, "bilingual education," is itself confusing. Bilingual education, as described in federal and state legislation and budgets, refers to a range of instructional support services for students who speak a language other than English and who are formally identified as lacking the necessary English language skills required by traditional English only classrooms. Such students are referred to in this legislation as being "Limited English Proficient." The purpose of these special support services is to ensure school success by helping students both to learn English and to learn their academic subjects, e.g., math, science, social

science and language arts. Thus, the term bilingual education is used interchangeably to refer to:

1. English-only services such as English as a Second Language (ESL, traditionally emphasizing English social communication language skills), content-based ESL (emphasis is placed on the development of the specific academic English language skills required by each content area, e.g., English math language, English science language, and English social science language), and sheltered English content instruction (primary emphasis is on the development of specific content skills such as mathematics, and a secondary emphasis on the development of the specific academic language skills required of the particular content area);

2. Instructional services which provide content instruction both in English and the student's non-English primary language. The main purpose of primary language use is to assure that the non-English speaking students are able to learn academic subject matter in the language they know best as they acquire their English language skills. In some higher quality programs, there is an added goal of providing the students with opportunities to continue to develop their primary language skills and to become fully proficient in two languages, English and their primary language. Educational programs which provide instruction in two languages also include one or more of the English only instructional services listed above as essential program components.

As alluded to above, these special instructional support services for students learning English tend to be funded primarily through federal and/or state monies. It is critical that the reader understand that almost all of currently existing specially funded so-called "bilingual education" instructional services fall into the first category above. That is, English-only instructional services comprise almost all instructional services provided through bilingual education funds. To minimize this potential confusion in the type of instructional services being discussed, I will not refer to bilingual education, but instead I will use the term multilingual education to refer to instructional programs wherein both English AND the child's primary language are used for instruction. In addition I will specify the particular English-only instructional approach under discussion.

The second important term to be clarified is "English Learner." Traditionally federal and state policy makers tend to use the more pejorative term, Limited English Proficient, which connotes a deficiency on the part of the student by emphasizing what the student does not know. In actuality, the student already knows another language and is "adding" English as a second language. From a more constructivist approach, to recognize and validate the important

knowledge that these children bring to the classroom, I prefer to use the term English Learner.

Assertions vs. Facts

The following presents a litany of the key arguments against “bilingual education” made by English-only advocates. My response follows each assertion. I present this information as a modest effort to assist local educators, parents, students, and members of the community in their quest to assure equity and access to rigorous and relevant education for ALL students in our public schools.

English-only: Bilingual Education does not work. The continued low achievement of Hispanic LEP students shows that bilingual education has failed.

Response: Data clearly shows that nationally almost all English Learners or LEP students receive an English-only program. Therefore, the low achievement of LEP students must indicate that English-only programs do not work.

As an example, almost all (over 80%) English Learners in California are in programs where no primary language is used for instruction. All of their instruction is in English. Nationally, the proportion of English Learners receiving English only instruction, under the auspices of “bilingual education,” is even higher. Thus, the results of student assessments clearly demonstrate that English-only Programs do not work. There is research evidence to show that the more infrequent “multilingual education” programs (those that incorporate primary language instruction) result in significant gains in content skill development and English language proficiency.

English-only: Bilingual programs are impractical because we do not have the bilingual teachers or resources to address the needs of the over 120 primary language groups in the United States, even in heavily impacted areas such as California, New York, New Jersey, Florida and Texas.

Response: It is practical, not to mention advisable, to provide multilingual programs in schools and classroom where there are sufficient numbers of English Learners speaking the same primary language. Moreover, it does not cost any more to provide a multilingual classroom than it does to provide a traditional English-only classroom. A RAND study in 1983 and the BW Associates study for the California State Legislature in 1992 found that providing special support services to English learners does not cost any more than the cost of providing a traditional English only program.

It is important to differentiate between schools with “small and scattered primary language populations” (e.g., Urdu) from those with substantial numbers of students speaking the same primary language (e.g., Spanish, Cantonese, Vietnamese or Khmer). While I concur that it is impractical to provide a full multilingual program for small and scattered primary language groups, as a teacher I am responsible for providing meaningful instruction to each of my students. If my student is the only Urdu speaking student in my class or my school and this student does not understand any English, I need to determine how to access other primary language resources so that the content is accessible. These could include cooperative learning activities with bilingual English-Urdu speaking students, working with the parents to help their child at home, or working with a community based organization that has multilingual services to provide this student with equal access to my lessons. However, in classrooms and schools where there are substantial numbers of students who speak the same primary language, it is practical to provide these students with equal access to the core curriculum in their primary language. This can be achieved as they are in the process of learning English through the services of a bilingual teacher specially trained to provide multilingual educational services, i.e., first and second language development as well as content instruction in English and the students' primary language.

Research clearly shows that providing students with primary language instruction does not slow down their rate of English language acquisition. Research indicates that English learners do not develop English language skills any faster when provided an English-only program than when provided with a program that combines quality English language development with quality primary language content instruction. National and international research indicates that it requires, on average, five or more years to develop the high level of academic English language skills required for classroom learning. This research also shows that English learners can clearly catch up to their English proficient peers in the content areas when provided access to the content in their primary language, even when they are tested in English.

Two major studies concluded that it does not cost any more to provide a multilingual classroom than it does to provide a traditional English-only classroom. A study by RAND Corporation for Congress (Samulon, 1983) and one conducted by BW Associates for the California State Legislature (BW Associates, 1992) all found that over 80% of the cost to educate a child is reflected in staff. Most districts do not pay bilingual teachers more than non-bilingual teachers and the cost of providing books and other learning materials for multilingual and traditional English-only classrooms does not differ. Therefore both studies concluded that it does not cost any more to provide a multilingual classroom than it does for a traditional English only classroom.

English-only: Since we cannot provide bilingual services (i.e., in this context, English-only advocates are referring to multilingual instruction) to all of the over 120 primary language groups, it is not fair to provide those services to any one of them.

Response: This is absurd. We currently have a critical shortage of math and science teachers. Should we drop all math and science education from our schools? More pointedly, this position is tantamount to saying, "Because there are not enough heart donors to meet the needs of all the patients in need of a heart transplant, we therefore should prohibit all heart transplants." As stated before, I agree that it is impractical to consider providing full multilingual services in situations where there are few and scattered primary language groups. However, in schools and districts where there are substantial numbers of the same primary language groups it is practical and reasonable.

English-only: The language of this land has always been English. Bilingual education is a legacy of the 1960s, which should be eliminated.

Response: This is not true. We tend to forget that not all of the colonists came from England. The early colonists also spoke and provided schooling in German, French, Dutch and Spanish. This practice continued into the 20th century wherever large enclaves of these primary language speakers lived. In fact, German-speaking public schools thrived in the mid-West until World War II when the anti-German sentiment forced many German Americans to disassociate themselves from their German heritage lest they be branded as being non-American and suffer the same treatment as Japanese Americans.

An examination of the history of language policy in the United States, quickly reveals that the various cycles of English-only efforts were more concerned with issues of economic and political enfranchisement of some groups over others rather than pedagogy, e.g., English-only business men over the Cherokee Nation; White landowners over Blacks in the South; and White settlers over Mexican residents in California. (Crawford, 1992)

The Articles of Confederation and the Declaration of Independence were, as a matter of course, consistently translated into these non-English languages to assure the full participation of all colonists. Attempts to have English declared as the "Official Language" (e.g., Benjamin Franklin) were soundly rejected by the Founders. They considered language a tool whose use should be determined by the individual and not the State. They clearly expressed the belief that what defined Americans was not the language they spoke, but their commitment to a democratic form of government.

Finally, the U.S. Supreme Court in 1966 clarified through the Lau decision that equal treatment alone does not guarantee equal access to educational opportunities. Instruction must be comprehensible to each student. Each school district must provide evidence documenting the efficacy for every student of whatever educational approaches are provided.

English-only: My grandparents were immigrants. They learned English without bilingual education and they were successful. Why do these groups need it?

Response: First, it is a myth that all immigrant groups were successful. While social language skills are quickly developed, e.g. on average within a year, the more demanding language skills needed for academic success requires at least 5 or more years to develop. (Ramirez, 1992 Collier, 1997) With the availability of plentiful low-skilled entry-level jobs, earlier immigrants did not need to develop high level academic skills to find a job. They could secure one with minimal social English language skills. Now, immigrants must master complicated academic skills to find employment in today's job market. To do so requires a more sophisticated mastery of academic English language skills, which requires more time to develop. There is no easy or quick fix to develop such skills.

Research documents that current immigrants are learning English at a faster rate than immigrants from prior generations. It used to take anywhere from three to four generations for the children of some immigrant groups entering prior to 1950s to enter the economic, social and political mainstream. There is substantial evidence that school failure or lack of school success was common for early immigrants. For example, Italian, Irish, Polish and Jewish immigrant children at the turn of the century left school early and did not enter high school. Data suggests that until the 1950s, immigrant and many first generation children received little formal education (e.g., Berrol, 1982; Bodnar, 1982; Fass, 1988; Perlmann, 1988).

English-only: Just because we are for English-only does not mean we are "anti-immigrant."

Response: This is not true. English-only initiatives patterned after those currently under consideration in California clearly target immigrant parents and their children. These initiatives dangerously erode the rights of all parents to determine the education that they would like for their children.

For example, under the California Unz initiative, language minority parents who want their children provided with some instruction in their primary language would be required to petition their school district for such services

each year. The services would only be provided if the parents were joined in their request by at least twenty other parents. As immigrant parents typically do not speak English, are not familiar with our political process or the school system, and are typically isolated in their communities, this proposed initiative creates several substantive and significant barriers for immigrant parents seeking a meaningful education for their children. Such barriers targeted to a specific group can only be construed as being anti-immigrant.

English-only: Bilingual advocates are simply trying to protect the jobs of bilingual teachers.

Response: This is a myth and is intentionally misleading to the public. Currently there is a shortage of teachers, particularly in states attempting to reduce class size. If multilingual education were to be prohibited, all of the bilingual teachers would still have their jobs; their teaching skills are badly needed. Since bilingual teachers tend to receive the same salary as non-bilingual teachers, there is no financial incentive for bilingual teachers to advocate for multilingual education other than their concern for the achievement of their students. Lastly, state and federal monies for education all require stringent accountability. This function is fulfilled by directors of multilingual education. If multilingual education were to be prohibited, such administrators would still be needed to provide program oversight.

English-only: English-only initiatives support local control.

Response: This is not true. In current practice, local school boards are able to choose from a range of educational programs the one that best suits the needs of their local community. In contrast, English-only initiatives dictate to school boards a single educational program. This shifts power away from the local communities to the state which would then have the responsibility for enforcing the provisions of the initiative.

English-only: English-only instruction supports and strengthens families.

Response: This is not true. In some instances, English-only families would be as negatively impacted by poorly constructed initiatives as language minority families. For example, the Unz initiative would prohibit the use of any language other than English in grades K-5. Instruction in a language other than English would be allowed in grades 6 and above only if the following conditions were met: parents annually petition their school board to provide their child with instruction in a language other than English, there are at least 19 other students with the same request, and each student demonstrates proficiency in English on a standardized measure by scoring 50% or higher.

As written, the Unz initiative would apply to both language minority and English-only speaking families.

Language minority families would be negatively impacted. Lilly Wong-Fillmore at the University of California, Berkeley compared English Learner preschoolers who were in an English-only program to those in a Primary Language instructional program. She found that English Learner preschoolers in the primary language instructional program showed greater growth when tested in English at the end of their kindergarten year than did their peers who had participated in the English-only preschool program. Of great concern was the impact upon the family.

Dr. Wong-Fillmore found that the English Learner preschoolers in the English-only program quickly stopped speaking their primary language and switched to English. This occurred not only in school but at home. The result was that the amount and content of parent-child interactions were greatly reduced and restricted. Parents, unable to communicate in English, were speaking less to their children, limiting their conversations to caretaking activities such as "Did you clean your room?" Parents were unaware of what was happening at school and found themselves unable to support their children's learning.

In contrast, language minority parents whose children were in primary language preschool programs continued with extended parent-child interactions and complex conversations, enabling parents to support their children's learning. The Unz initiative, and similar English-only proposals would serve to weaken language minority families, and assure that these parents would not be able to support their children's learning meaningfully and actively.

English-only speaking families would also be hurt by the 'initiative. There is a growing number of English speaking parents who recognize the social, economic and political advantages of multilingualism, have their children placed in Two Way Bilingual Immersion Education programs or in foreign language programs. As written the Unz initiative would prohibit these families from availing themselves of these programs at the elementary level. At the secondary level, assuming a normal distribution of test scores, one could expect that half of English speaking students currently enrolled in foreign language classes would score below 50%. Under the Unz initiative these students would be forced out of such classes. This exclusion would curtail their ability to meet foreign language requirements for college admission.

English-only: English-only instruction will strengthen communities.

Response: English-only proposals tend to weaken the social fabric of the community as well as its economic potential. Using the Unz initiative as an example, as proposed it is already exacerbating divisions between nonimmigrant and immigrant groups (even among those sharing similar language and cultural backgrounds), racial groups and English and language minority groups. If passed, the Unz initiative would also make school personnel personally liable if they use a language other than English in schools. Testimony was recently submitted in a pending court case regarding incidents in a Southern California school district, where teachers reported that “language vigilantes” comprised of “concerned citizens” went through classrooms and pulled down any signs that were not in English. (Quiroz vs. Orange Unified School District, 1997) One can only imagine how the Unz initiative, if passed, could catalyze these and other “patriotic Americans” to more extreme actions. Such a climate is not conducive towards creating a spirit of collaboration between the school, home and community.

The business community in the United States is an important part of an increasingly competitive global economy. It is clamoring for a workforce that is both multilingual and multicultural. Restricting the students' opportunities for developing multilingual language skills would limit the economic opportunities of the students and would serve to restrict the needs of our expanding labor force.

English-only: The public education bureaucracy is not responsive to the needs of local schools. Sponsors of the Unz initiative attribute their efforts to the failure of the California Department of Education in providing local school boards with the flexibility to determine the kind of education they would like to provide to their children. Only four school districts out of over a thousand districts in the State successfully obtained waivers from the California Department of Education exempting them from providing bilingual education.

Response: Such claims are examples of sensationalism and intentional misinformation. While it is true that there are over a thousand school districts in California, it is important to note that, to date, only four districts submitted such waiver requests. Thus, every district that has sought a waiver from the State has obtained one. If one is truly concerned about maximizing local control, one would think that efforts to streamline the waiver request process would be more appropriate than ones which only serve to limit choices for students, parents, school boards, and communities.

English-only: English-only initiatives unite our communities with a common language. They help to avoid the balkanization occurring in Canada and assure non-English speakers a fair chance at “The American Dream.”

Response: This statement reinforces attitudes and behaviors which serve to divide communities rather than to bring them together. It also misrepresents the reality of American society.

English-only campaigns exacerbate conflicts between speakers of English and native born citizens. The English-only movement reinforces attitudes against English Learners, e.g., "They do not want to learn English," and "Their children are taking limited resources from our children." These attitudes are surprising given the research documenting that the rate of transition to English among immigrants has gone from two or three generations to one generation. Also, the demand for English classes among immigrant adults far outpaces the availability of such services. Immigrants are learning English and they are learning it at a faster rate than their predecessors.

The media has and continues to be a willing partner in creating a climate of mistrust and conflict within the community around immigrant and language issues. News articles consistently report information in a superficial, sensational, confrontational style, focusing on the extremes: "Us against them." Rather than receiving clear, direct information which would allow them to make a reasoned decision, readers are forced into taking sides. No middle ground is sought. Reacting to this critique, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times responded, "A balanced article does not sell papers; conflict does."

Conclusion

In a moment of generosity, one might assert that the unstated assumption behind English-only initiatives is the belief that English proficiency is the key to harmony within the community as well as to personal success (when combined with hard work and sacrifice). However, it has been my observation that White women are as proficient in English as White men. It is equally obvious that many members of so-called "model minorities" such as Japanese and Chinese Americans also demonstrate formidable proficiency in English, as well as high educational attainment comparable to or exceeding that of many more successful White men. Furthermore, many Latino Americans and African Americans have successfully acquired academic English language skills and advanced academic credentials. Yet, White women and men and women of color do not enjoy the same level of economic, political or social opportunity as their White male counterparts. As noted earlier, language policy in the United States has been and continues to be used as an effective tool to control access to social, economic and political resources. These examples illustrate that underlying the "language problem" are issues of racism, sexism, classism and ethnocentrism. Consequently, the conflict within our communities will not be resolved solely by requiring that everyone speak English, but by directly addressing these underlying issues.

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