Bilingual Education:

Why Culture Matters

Mara Krilanovich
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Language and Culture

Dr. Galang
Bilingualism is fast becoming an important part of the culture in North America as immigration continues to increase. According to the Department of Homeland Security (2002), the vast majority of immigrants are from Mexico followed by the Philippines. California is receiving most of the immigrants from around the world (Department of Homeland Security, 2002). As the diversity of the population increases, the need for bilingual education and cultural integration also increases. An integration of culture into bilingual education programs is crucial to the success of those programs and to the success of the students in those programs. Bilingual programs can also serve as the basis for easing the cultural transition for both native and immigrant populations.

Outside of the United States, bilingualism is common throughout the world. There are a wide variety of ways that people learn to be bilingual. There are also a variety of utilities for languages, and many ways societies value languages (Institute of Medicine Staff, 1998). There are two forms of bilingualism that are commonly referred to as “additive” and “subtractive”. In additive bilingualism, the first language is secure, and the second language serves as enrichment. French immersion programs in English speaking countries, such as Canada, are an example of additive bilingualism. In direct contrast, subtractive bilingualism describes the cases in which the first language is less valued and considered non-permanent. It is assumed that the language learner will dispose of the first language in favor of the second language, which is that of the dominant culture. The majority of immigrants to English-speaking countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia, experience subtractive bilingualism. They are placed in a situation where their first language is not valued and is perceived to have little utility in the greater society. Therefore, their native language skills denigrate over time,
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and English becomes their dominant language (Institute of Medicine Staff, 1998).

Subtractive bilinguals suffer even more: if the loss of their first language occurs early in life, they perform less well on many cognitive measures (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003). The value that a society places on language can have a profound effect on bilinguals.

Research into the effects of bilingualism on cognitive abilities has found that bilinguals have greater cognitive ability in information processing (Hamers and Blanc, 1989). French research that was controlled for age, sex, and socio-economic level found that bilinguals scored higher on measures of intelligence than monolinguals. The researchers of that study posited that this difference is due to the greater cognitive flexibility and ease in concept formation found in bilinguals as a result of the navigation of two language systems (Hamers and Blanc, 1989). This would lead us to believe that bilingual education would not only benefit immigrants, but all students, as they would likely perform better in their academic careers.

Despite societal resistance, bilingual programs continue to exist in United States and are an important part of the early education of immigrants, particularly Latino and Asian immigrants in California (Valdivia, 2000). The majority of programs in the United States are found in California, Texas, and New York (Howard and Sugarman, 2001). The typical students in those programs are low-income, native Spanish speakers (Howard and Sugarman, 2001). Other countries, including those in Latin America, offer Spanish and English bilingual programs. In contrast to the United States, these bilingual programs are of cultural value and mainly available to those of high socio-economic status (Valdivia,
This author is personally aware of several of these types of programs in Medellin, Colombia.

One of the major issues that bilingual education faces in the United States is the low value placed by the society on the immigrant’s native language, be it Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, or any other non-English language. Students in the past have been punished for speaking those languages in favor of English (Calderon and Carreon, 2000; Valdivia, 2000). That ‘English-only’ attitude persists in the United States today despite the growing need for bilinguals in business contexts. One only has to look at the job postings on any given day to see that individuals with verbal and written fluency in multiple languages are desired in the workforce.

One example of the society’s lack of value of bilingual programs is codified in the passage of California’s Proposition 227 in 1998. The aim of that legislation is to essentially dismantle bilingual education programs in favor of sheltered English immersion. According to that legislation, the period of time students are to spend in a sheltered English immersion program is not to exceed one year (de Cos, 1999). In contrast, the most successful bilingual programs have instruction in the native (50%) and target (50%) languages for at least four years (Calderon and Carreon, 2000).

There are two opposing bilingual program foci: enrichment or remediation. Two-way bilingual programs, also referred to as dual-language programs, are often focused on enrichment and integrate language-minority and language-majority students in both languages (the most common are Spanish/English programs) (Calderon and Carreon, 2000). Programs focused on remediation in the United States are geared toward building English skills and eventually disposing of the student’s primary language in favor of
There are benefits to students enrolled in bilingual education programs that are focused on enrichment. Students who participate in bilingual programs that maintain their native language appear to have better success throughout in their academic careers than students who are forced to abandon their native language in favor of English immersion (Valdivia, 2000).

Bilingual education programs benefit immigrant students in playing ‘catch-up’ with their monolingual English speaking peers as they are provided with instruction across the curriculum in their primary language (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003). This may be particularly beneficial in high school where more emphasis is placed on each core subject matter. One study of a two-way bilingual (Spanish/English) high school program found academic benefits for both native speakers of Spanish and native speakers of English. Both groups of students reported feeling smarter as a result of learning two languages (Lindholm-Leary and Borsato, 2002).

While the research on bilingual programs has primarily focused on the cognitive, academic, and socio-cultural benefits for students of minority status, little has been presented on the benefits to language majority students. Students of the ethnic and linguistic majority can benefit from bilingual programs. In addition to the cognitive benefits mentioned previously, empirical evidence suggests that the more students are informed about and in contact with other cultures, the less prejudiced they will be (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003). With this in mind, bilingual education programs have the potential to affect positive social change.
If children are to develop a positive sense of themselves and their culture, bilingual programs can be a key component of that process. Culture groups are defined by their distinctive features; language is one distinguishing feature that is important to cultural identity development and maintenance (Hamers and Blanc, 1989). By the age of six, children have formed a sense of cultural identity by which they categorize themselves as different (Hamers and Blanc, 1989). Bilingual programs that integrate the students’ culture are particularly important for students of minority status. “The relationship between bilinguality and cultural identity is reciprocal: bilinguality influences the development of cultural identity, which in turn influences the development of bilinguality” (Hamers and Blanc, 1989, page 121). Bilinguals can develop a multicultural identity by which they can adhere to the norms of both the dominant and minority cultures. Bilingual programs, if they value the student’s first language, can play a role in positive identity development and the empowerment of language and ethnic minority groups (Ovado, Collier, and Combs, 2003). While there isn’t a strong body of research that demonstrates a causal relationship between identity and academic achievement, there have been some positive relationships between these two variables drawn (Lockett and Harrell, 2003).

Trujillo, et. al. (2003) agree that the integration of culture and the students’ primary language enhances the development of identity. They go further to say that bilingual programs are most effective when language and culture are shared by both student and teacher. In other words, Chinese bilingual students should be paired with Chinese bilingual teachers.
Further, communication in the classroom is enhanced when there is a cultural and linguistic match between student and teacher. This cultural match has an impact on student achievement for two major reasons: (1) the norms of classroom interaction are strongly influenced by culture and (2) classroom conversation is much more difficult in a second language (Institute of Medicine Staff, 1998). There appear to be more opportunities for students to engage collaborative learning, have opportunities to participate in an emotionally and academically comfortable climate, and feel a sustained sense of group belonging (Hernandez, Sheets, and Chew, 2003). Those instructors who were not of the same culture as the students reported feeling that it is a struggle for them to provide the students the cultural context they require to develop a cultural identity (Hernandez, Sheets, and Chew, 2003; Yamauchi, Ceppi and Lau-Smith, 2000).

Instructors should also be aware of the pedagogy of the students’ native country in order to facilitate transfer of skill, particularly literacy knowledge that is transferred from the student’s primary language to the target language (Watkins-Goffman and Cummings, 1997). This facilitates the development of the students voice in the target language according to Watkins-Goffman and Cummings (1997). The more students are given the opportunity to develop academic language expertise in their primary language, the better they will succeed in the development of academic language in the target language (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003).

According to Calderon and Carreon (2000), teachers in bilingual programs must have a profound knowledge of the subject matter, a wide variety of teaching strategies, and near expert knowledge of the students’ language and culture. One method of addressing this cultural match is to have two instructors per classroom who, as a team,
match the students’ ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. This naturally creates a challenge of availability of qualified teachers. An Amarillo Globe-News reporter stated that schools in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and New Mexico are “desperately seeking” bilingual teachers (Wilson, 2005, page 1).

If teachers are not available who match the students’ cultural background, or if there are a great number of cultural backgrounds represented in the classroom, there are some strategies suggested by Schwarzer, Haywood, and Lorenzen (2003). They propose diversity training for teachers, language sensitivity training whereby they experience being instructed in a language they are unfamiliar with, and integration of culturally relevant materials that reflect the students’ backgrounds (Schwarzer, Haywood, and Lorenzen, 2003).

One successful example of this cultural matching, among many, is found in a Hawaiian program. The classrooms were re-constructed to reflect the values of the Hawaiian culture and themes consistent with the cultural values, including taking care of the land and multi-age activities, were used in the curriculum (Yamauchi, Ceppi and Lau-Smith, 2000). At the start of this particular program, the focus was on the maintenance of a heritage language. As the program progressed, important issues of Hawaiian pride, cultural values, and identity development were emphasized (Yamauchi, Ceppi and Lau-Smith, 2000).

Incorporation and recognition of culture is not the only characteristic that facilitates the success of bilingual programs. In order for bilingual education programs to be successful, there are other criteria to be met. Calderon and Carreon (2000) propose eight criteria that are critical to the success of such programs: (1) minimum of four to six
years of bilingual instruction, (2) the academic content should be the same as other programs, (3) quality language instruction and student work in both languages, (4) the target language should be used a minimum of 50%, (5) promotion of additive bilingualism, (6) a good mix of students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds who participate together, (7) cooperative learning and other strategies to promote positive student interaction should be used, and (8) the program utilizes quality educational practices, including hiring qualified personnel and home-school collaboration.

Additional classroom practices for successful bilingual programs are (1) having theme based content taught in both languages, (2) incorporation of discovery learning, (3) extensive peer interaction using cooperative learning activities, (4) use of higher order thinking skills, and (5) integration of technology (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003). These practices, if incorporated with at least five years of quality schooling, will facilitate academic achievement for language minority students (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003).

Another practice that facilitates the success of bilingual programs is the use of empowerment pedagogy. Cummins originally proposed a framework for empowerment pedagogy that is based on four tenants (McCarty, Watahomigie, Yamamoto, and Zepeda, 1997). The first is an additive approach to bilingual education. The second is an incorporation of the local community’s input as the community has a great knowledge of their language and culture, which should serve as a basis for learning. The third tenant of Cummins’ framework is an inclusion of interactive and experiential learning in the classroom. The fourth tenant is focused on assessment: evaluation of students’ work
should be ‘advocacy-oriented’ and focused on the students’ bilingual strengths rather than their deficits (McCarty, Watahomigie, Yamamoto, and Zepeda, 1997).

Empowerment pedagogy “creates an interactive, experiential classroom in which critical thinking skills are developed; cooperative learning is used for interactive, small-group problem solving; and process writing is developed” (Ovando, Collier, and Combs, 2003, page 142). This methodology provides for an active learning environment where cultural exchanges are encouraged. Gone are the days of the teacher as the ‘sage on the stage’.

With all of these positive aspects of bilingual education, why not implement bilingual education programs everywhere? Quality bilingual education programs can be difficult to implement and it can be a challenge to recruit qualified teachers for these programs. The most crucial factor affecting the lack of availability of bilingual programs, in this author’s view, is the lack societal value placed on bilingual education and the lack of knowledge of its academic benefits. Still prevalent in the society of the United States, is the ‘English-only’ attitude and the belief that monoligualism is still appropriate.

Despite the fear and prejudice driving the passages of initiatives like California’s Proposition 227, there is a considerable need for bilinguals. The Department of Homeland Security is in desperate need for workers in a multitude of languages (Arabic, in particular, at present), the growing immigration is putting pressure on businesses to offer multilingual services and the growth of international business dealings also provides an opportunity for bilinguals to be successful (Hamilton-Wright, 2005). According the Pew Hispanic Center’s 2002 survey, bilingual Spanish/English speakers earn much more
than their monolingual Spanish counterparts (Gardner, 2004). Gardner’s 2004 article in *The Hispanic Outlook on Higher Education* asserts that bilingualism is a far greater asset to a growing number of businesses than English proficiency.

Professionals agree. Quoted by Hamilton-Wright in the Miami Herald in March 2005, Joy Peyote, vice president of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C., stated, "Recently, since 9-11, the issue of being multilingual and proficient in other languages has gained visibility and focus. The emphasis is on defense work and business as well as international diplomacy. It's also important in areas like commerce, service positions, and also to preserve family and community." (Hamilton-Wright, 2005, page 1D). As this need increases, so must the number of bilingual education programs.
References


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