

Bilingualism: an Eternal Dilemma

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In the United States, English is not the only language spoken by its residents. According to the National Virtual Translation Center, 311 languages are spoken here. Many factors have contributed to the proliferation of different languages: for instance, migration, trade and commerce, and education and culture. In fact, the society of the United States is multicultural with increasing minority groups; as a result, a great number of persons are becoming bilingual. Certainly, bilingualism offers communication, cultural, and cognitive advantages; it also has a positive impact on the development of a multicultural society. Unfortunately, there are Americans who do not value the benefits of bilingualism, and in some cases they have pressed political agendas to reject any tolerance or encouragement of political or educational initiatives promoting bilingualism in the United States.

Background. Bilingualism implies the facility to use two languages. According to Grosjean, “bilingualism is present in practically every country of the world, in all classes of society, and in all age groups” (1); in fact, approximately half of the world’s population is bilingual. However, it is estimated that few bilingual persons are equally proficient in their languages; some feel more comfortable speaking in one language rather than the other. Bialystok defines language proficiency as “the ability to function in a situation that is defined by specific cognitive and linguistic demands, to a level of performance indicated by either objective criteria or normative standards” (“Bilingualism” 18). Bilinguals are continually switching from one language to the other depending on the context and the situation.

On the one hand, children in many countries around the world are encouraged to speak two or more languages; for example, in Belgium, Nigeria, Canada, Luxembourg, and India. In “Good Intentions, Bad Advice for Bilingual Families,” Rebecca Harlin and Oneyda M. Paneque observe that “globally, knowing more than one language is viewed as an asset and even a necessity in many areas.” In contrast, in the United States, where bilingualism is common among immigrant families, it is often viewed as a threat to the English language, which remains the sole language spoken by many of its residents. The immigrant child’s first language is, for the most part, used in education only to reach the main goal, which is to learn English: as Noel Epstein states, “almost all bilingual education [in the U.S.] is intended to move children into English-speaking classrooms” (Ridge 133). According to Americans who support English-only policies, it is not important to maintain the native language. Indeed, many immigrants become monolingual in English, giving up their own language in order to be accepted as part of mainstream society of the United States.

And yet, a report released on October 8, 2003 by the U.S. Census Bureau stated “nearly 1-in-5 people, or 47 million U.S. residents age 5 and older, spoke a language other than English at home in 2000” (Language Use and English Speaking Ability: 2000). In addition, the California Department of Education has reported a total of 1,568,661 English language learners throughout the state during the academic year 2006-2007. There are as many of 56 languages other than English spoken in California. 85.3% of these English learners speak Spanish, followed by 2.2% who speak Vietnamese, 1.4% Cantonese, 1.4% Filipino, 1.3% Hmong, and

1.1% Korean. Of the remaining languages, each represents less than 1% of the English learners.

History of Bilingualism. In the United States, English has not been the only language spoken in its territory. It was not until the British came and established the thirteen colonies that the English language came to be spoken in this part of America. Before this happened, the Native Americans had their own cultures and their own languages. Besides the English people, other early groups to immigrate to the United States included Spanish, French, Dutch and German immigrants, each with a different language.

Language issues are not new in the United States; during colonial times, the Germans encountered some problems because they wanted to retain their language. According to Crawford, they had a German newspaper; they read books in their language brought from Germany; in addition, the Courts accepted documents written in German (“Language” 19). In 1782, John Adams proposed to set official standards for American English; but the leaders of this era rejected the idea considering “that the government had no business mandating the people’s language choices” (Crawford, “Language” 10). In addition, Spanish was spoken in the territories acquired by the United States after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848 to end the Mexican-American War. The Spanish speaking people from those territories (present-day states of California, New Mexico, Nevada, and parts of Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and Oklahoma) got their rights, land titles, and religion protected by the treaty in the articles VIII, IX, and X (Acuña 48-49).

Request and Need for Bilingual Education. In the United States, immigrant parents have requested bilingual education for their children. Since the 18th century, bilingual education was present in some public and

private schools in the United States; English and other languages were used for instruction without a problem. Therefore, bilingualism was present in many states of the country; Crawford states that “fluency in more than one language was commonplace in eighteenth-century America, especially in the cosmopolitan “middle colonies”” (“Hold” 35). Bilingual education programs have ended due to different reasons. According to Grosjean, “bilingualism in the United States is basically short-lived and transitional, in that it links monolingualism in one language — usually an immigrant language — to monolingualism in the majority language, English” (44).

German Americans were one of the immigrant groups that requested bilingual education for their children; their native language was used for instruction in schools. The German speaking population had private schools where the instruction was entirely in their language; “there were German schools in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and other states with strong German minorities” (Grosjean 68).

In 1963, the Cubans, another group of immigrants, requested bilingual education for their children in public schools of Dade County, Florida. Unlike other immigrants, the Cubans thought they would not stay permanently in the United States; sooner or later, they would go back to Cuba when Castro fell. Therefore, they wanted to preserve their language. The federal Cuban Refugee Program provided funds to retrain and recertify Cuban teachers and some money went to the Dade County public schools. Also, the Ford Foundation give a grant to help the district implement the first bilingual education program at the Coral Way School; it “was an unabashed Spanish-maintenance program for Cuban children and at the same time a Spanish “immersion” program for Anglo children. The goal was fluency in both languages for both groups” (Crawford,

“Hold” 93). Bilingual education programs like this one are known as two-way immersion or dual language. Currently, dual language programs are being established in some public and private school in states like California, Colorado, and Texas among others. These programs are requested by groups of parents that support bilingualism. Parents have acknowledged the importance and benefits of speaking other languages than English. The article “School district eyes language courses elementary students,” written for the Palo Alto Daily News by Neil Gonzales, says that students in the Menlo Park City School District “could soon start learning Spanish or another foreign language as part of their regular classes.”

According to the California Department of Education, two-way bilingual immersion (TWBI) programs began in California between 1980 and 1986. These programs are also known as dual language immersion programs. During those years, cities such as San Francisco, San Jose, Windsor, Santa Monica-Malibu, and Oakland established two-way bilingual programs in public schools (slide 3). Currently, nationwide there are 330 programs implemented in 27 states and the District of Columbia. Of these programs, 201 programs are established in 90 districts of California (“Two”).

The California Department of Education defines two-way bilingual immersion as “a program that develops bilingualism and biliteracy in English and a second language by integrating English learners (ELs) with English speakers (proficient in English)” (“Two”). In a two-way bilingual immersion program, the instruction is done in and through both languages where the “target language (other than English) is used for [a] minimum of 50% of the time and English is used for [a] minimum of 10% of [the] time” (California Department of Education, “Two”). Two-way bilingual immersion programs have three main goals. The first

goal is bilingualism; students will acquire high levels of proficiency in English and a second language. The second is biliteracy; students will acquire high levels of academic proficiency in English and a second language. The third is multicultural competence; students will be able to understand different cultures and will develop a high self-esteem (California Department of Education, “Two”).

Even though, bilingual education was established since the 18th century in schools of the United States, many people have mistaken beliefs about bilingual education and myths have been created around it. As a result, bilingual education always has been a controversial issue among Americans. Bilingual education is constantly under attack by people who have misconceptions about it making them oppose to bilingual education.

One of the common fallacies about bilingual education is that bilingual education is far more costly than English language instruction. Obviously, there is a discrepancy between the costs of regular programs for native English speakers and programs developed for LEP students; but it is not so huge. In 1992, a study was conducted in selected California schools to examine the costs of bilingual programs and English-only approaches. Crawford points out that “the incremental cost was about the same each year (\$175-\$214) for bilingual and English immersion programs, as compared with \$1,198 for English as a second language (ESL) “pullout” programs.” He states that the reason why “pullout” programs are more expensive than the other programs is because they need supplemental teachers, “whereas in-class approaches do not.” Even though, “pullout” programs cost more than bilingual programs, these are still used in many school districts (“Ten”).

Another fallacy, disproportionate dropout rates for Hispanic students demonstrate the failure of bilingual education. Among Hispanic students dropout rates are high;

approximately 28% of Hispanic students drop out of high school (Valencia 113). Research shows that there are personal and institutional factors which contribute to drop out conditions, for instance, residential mobility, academic achievement, student engagement, background characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and language background), low educational and occupational aspirations, teenage parenthood, families, schools, and community influence (Valencia 120-131). According to Crawford, “No credible studies, however, have identified bilingual education among the risk factors, because bilingual programs touch only a small minority of Hispanic children” (“Ten”).

Efforts to Reject Bilingualism in the United States. In contrast to the more liberal attitudes of the past towards bilingualism outlined above, in the United States today, public attitudes towards bilingualism are often more negative. Some US residents do not encourage their children to learn and acquire a second language; study of foreign language in general is usually a minor part of school curricula. However, some proponents of “English Only” want immigrants to speak English and attempt to ban the public use of other languages. Zeynep F. Beykont states that “the English Only movement aims to adopt English as the official language of the United States and thereby protect the power and privileges enjoyed by native speakers of Standard English” (IX). Crawford agrees with Beykont, adding that the Official English group is among the opponents of bilingualism in the United States. This group was created in 1983; its members want to establish English as the official language of the United States. The supporters of Official English say that in this country English has always been the common language; although, as discussed above, English has not been the only language spoken in the United States since its creation as a nation. Official English supporters look at the English language as a unifying force for

Americans; they consider English “an essential tool of social mobility and economic advancement” (“Language” 2) for people living in the United States.

After examining the rationales offered by these two pro-English groups, it is apparent, as Baron states, that “advocates of official-English legislation frequently assume an identity between language and nation” (5). English is seen as the unifying force of the American society. Baron contends that proponents of this initiative have made a strong connection between language and nation; they believe the nation’s ideals can only be accessed and symbolized by means of the English language (7). For this reason, they argue that all residents of the United States should speak English; citizens who speak English are seen as true Americans by official English advocates. These supporters see other languages and cultures as a threat to the integrity of American society.

Opponents of Official English. Crawford challenges the statements made by United States Official English leaders. He claims that “rather than promote English proficiency, 99 percent of the organization’s efforts go toward restricting the use of other languages” (“Language” 176). According to him, these leaders want to eliminate any kind of bilingual services in clinics and hospitals by enforcing English-only rules among the workers in such places.

Similarly, bilingual education has suffered attacks from people who want to eliminate it. For example, Ron Unz initiated Proposition 227, which passed in June 1998. This proposition was created to eliminate bilingual education programs, particularly in California. Unz called the campaign “English for Children;” claiming that bilingual education programs were failing to provide minority students with the level of proficiency in English to succeed in school.

Opponents of Official English believe that this movement wants to “terminat[e] essential

services in other languages” (Crawford, “Language” 3). In addition, opponents think that Official English goes against the civil rights of the people, since by law there is no official language in the United States. Official English diminishes educational opportunities for people who speak languages other than English. Some minority groups have been living in the territories now known as the United States longer than English speakers; therefore, opponents of Official English see this movement as an insult to these groups’ cultural heritage (Crawford, “Language” 3). For example, many Spanish speaking people living in the Southwest of the United States were already living in those territories before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed in 1848. They did not migrate to this country; the country came to them. Suddenly, these people felt like strangers in their own territories; they encountered a new culture with a different language. Crawford states that “the English Only movement serves to justify racist and nativist biases under the cover of American Patriotism” (“Language” 3).

Opponents of the English Only Movement have proposed an alternative called English Plus. In 1987, more than fifty civil rights and educational organizations opposed to Official English unified their efforts creating the English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC). According to EPIC, “the English Plus concept holds that the national interest can best be served when all members of our society have full access to effective opportunities to acquire strong English language proficiency plus mastery of a second or multiple languages” (Crawford, “Language” 152). In other words, EPIC promotes bilingualism or multilingualism for all U. S. residents. Native speakers of English

while continuing to develop their proficiency in English will acquire proficiency in a foreign language or languages. In contrast, immigrants will be able to maintain proficiency in their native languages and also become proficient in English.

Conclusion. There are many benefits to becoming bilingual. Bilingualism helps to develop a better society that values and respects the richness of diversity. In addition, it allows interaction with people from other cultures. Americans should not fear bilingualism; in fact, many countries are bilingual or multilingual. It is time to set ethnocentric views aside and welcome other languages and cultures. Indeed, no language or culture is better than any other. In the United States, according to Baron “although individuals often do become bilingual, learning English and retaining an ethnic language, as well, bilingualism has not become institutionalized. For many, knowledge of a language other than English marks them as unassimilated and educationally deficient, not as scholars or national assets” (15).

However, despite the efforts of opponents of bilingual education and bilingualism to keep the United States as a monolingual country in English; there are many quiet ways in which other languages and cultures are starting to reach many US residents. For instance, the number of Spanish speaking people is growing in many states. Therefore, Latino culture is spreading through popular and youth culture, new trends, film, food, and music; this is shifting public tastes through the force of sheer numbers. The language of power will change; as it always has done, throughout world history.

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