DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 127 830 FL 007 997

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TITLE The Role of ESL in Bilingual Programs: A Clarification.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Bilingual-Bicultural Education Conference (5th, San Antonio, Texas, April 30-May 5, 1976) and at the Interdisciplinary Linguistics Conference (University of Louisville, Kentucky, May 6-8, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; *Educational Assessment; Educational Objectives; *English (Second Language); Language Instruction; Language of Instruction; Language Programs; Second Language Learning; *Teacher Education; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The field of ESL in recent years has drawn much criticism from bilingual educators. This criticism is related to three areas: the former use of ESL in Americanization programs, the role of ESL in legislation providing for transitional bilingual programs, and the failure of the ESL component in certain bilingual programs, due either to the teacher, student, or evaluator factor. Certain recommendations can be made to improve the three areas mentioned. Through individual as well as group effort, pressure can be brought to bear upon school boards and state and federal legislatures to view ESL as the tool to make children bilingual, not as the tool to convert them to monolingual English speakers. In addition, improvements in preparation of evaluators and teachers can be made. Since ESL is part of bilingual education, the progress of bilingual education as a whole depends on the quality of each of its parts. (Author)

THE ROLE OF ESL IN BILINGUAL PROGRAMS:

A CLARIFICATION

by

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A paper presented at the Fifth Annual
International Bilingual/Bicultural Education Conference
April 30-May 5, 1976, San Antonio, Texas
and
at the University of Louisville
Interdisciplinary Linguistics Conference
May 6-8, 1976, Louisville, Kentucky

THE ROLE OF ESL IN BILINGUAL PROGRAMS: A CLARIFICATION

In recent years with the advent of bilingual education in the United States, the field of ESL--that is, the teaching of English as a second language--has drawn much criticism from bilingual educators. In this paper, I propose to identify several reasons why this criticism has occurred; to suggest ways of eliminating the reasons for criticism; and, further, to clarify what ESL is and what it should be within the scope of bilingual programs.

One reason for criticism is related to the manner in which ESL was formerly used within our educational system. For decades the "melting pot" theory was the dominant one for dealing with immigrants to the U.S., and at times for dealing with the Native Americans. Numerous historical examples of this policy may be cited. Among the strongest is a statement made in 1880 by the Commissioner of Indian Affairs:

> "The first step to be taken toward civilization, toward teaching the Indian the mischief and folly of continuing in their barbarous practices, is to teach him the English language. . . . we must remove the stumbling blocks of hereditary customs and manners, and of those language is one of the most important." (Saville-Troike 1976:130)

With the impact of bilingual education, ESL became synonymous in the eyes of many bilingual educators with the hated "melting pot" theory. In essence, ESL became a scapegoat.

That ESL was formerly--and in some areas is still--used as the vehicle for Americanization at the cost of the student's native language and culture is, indeed, reprehensible. This use, however, is not the fault of ESL as a body of knowledge, but rather the fault of the educators

that have employed it in such a manner. ESL was, and still is, a systematic approach to teaching English as a second language based on research in language acquisition; its purpose is to teach English to non-native speakers as effectively and as efficiently as possible. To counter the charge of some bilingual educators that ESL does not take into account the cultural background of the student or support first language maintenance, one need only refer to statements made by people within the field itself. According to Russell N. Campbell, former TESOL president, "No ESL scholar that I have ever met has included in his/her curricular plans overt suppression of a learner's native language or culture." (Campbell 1976:5) In addition, James E. Alatis, executive secretary of TESOL, has stated, "Language maintenance, in fact, has never, never been discouraged by specialists in the field of English as a second language." (Alatis 1976:6) Further, "Teachers of English as a second language have always recognized the dual language and dual culture basis of bilingualism." (Alatis 1976:9) Finally, several sections of the guidelines for the preparation of ESL teachers clearly address this issue:

> . . . the teacher of English as a second language . . . is expected to . . . insure understanding and respect for his students and their cultural setting.
>
> . . . have had the experience of learning another language and acquiring a knowledge of its structure; and have a conscious perception of another cultural sustem.
>
> . . . have a sophisticated understanding of the factors which contribute to the life styles of various peoples, and which determine both their uniqueness and their interrelationship in a pluralistic society. (TESOL 1976:340)

A second area of criticism, I believe, is related to the role of ESL in legislation concerning bilingual education. In certain states which have mandated bilingual education, such as Illinois and Michigan,

the law is defined as "transitional." That is, bilingual education is required, usually for a period of three years, until the student is sufficiently capable in English to function in the regular school curriculum. Granted, such legislation is a step forward in the realm of recognition of rights to education for all minority groups. However, the major thrust of the law remains the same: the objective is the acquisition of English and not the maintenance of the student's first language or culture.[1]

[1]In the categorization of Joshua Fishman, this is compensatory bilingual education oriented toward minorities and disadvantaged groups, rather than enrichment or elitist bilingual education. (Fishman 1976)

In the eyes of many bilingual educators, ESL again becomes the scapegoat, the major force suppressing the child's home language and culture. Again, I contend that the problem lies not with the body of knowledge known as ESL, but rather with the legislators who mandate its use to make schools conform to their concept of what education should be.

Finally, ESL has garnered criticism from many observers of fledgling bilingual programs. The basis of criticism is that the children in certain programs have not become bilingual--that is, they have not acquired enough English skills to make them functional in the standard school curriculum. Here again I contend that ESL as a field of knowledge is not the culprit. Where to lay the blame in this case, however, becomes more difficult. One problem can lie with the observer/evaluator. Many educators outside the field of language instruction are often unaware of the length of time needed for a person to become proficient in a second language. Younger children, indeed, acquire a second language more rapidly than older ones; those taught systematically acquire the language at a faster pace than those who are merely exposed to it. Yet, proficiency in a second language

must be considered in terms of years, not weeks or months. A second problem can lie with the student--a problem, I might add, that is usually beyond his control. Many students in our bilingual programs come from families who return to Mexico or Puerto Rico annually, usually during the winter season either to escape the cold or to be with relatives during the Christmas holidays. A child who receives ESL training, no matter how excellent, for three months in the fall and then leaves the school for three months cannot be expected to perform well in English when he returns for the spring months. One last problem area can involve the teacher himself. Not all bilingual teachers--no matter how excellent they may be in terms of teaching culture, teaching science or math concepts in the students' native language, or establishing a good working relationship with the students--are necessarily trained in the methods of teaching English to non-native speakers.

I have now identified several aspects of ESL instruction which I believe have caused scepticism and alienation among bilingual educators. The next logical step is to rectify the situation. This rectification is essential for the progress of bilingual education in the U.S. Since one of the purposes of bilingual education is to make children bilingual, and since in the United States one of the languages in which the children must be bilingual is English, the instruction of English as a second language is a necessary component of the bilingual program.[2]

[2]As defined by the Bilingual Education Act, P. L. 93-380, Section 703 (a)(4)(A), a program of bilingual education means "a program of instruction, designed for children of limited English-speaking ability . . . in which . . . there is instruction given in, and study of, English, and . . . the native language of the child . . ." (Title VII)

Certainly the National Association for Bilingual Education does not contradict this position. NABE defines bilingual education as "the continuous use and presence of two languages and their corresponding cultures. One of the languages must be English." (Alatis 1976:317) Further, Albar Peña, 1975-76 NABE president, has stated:

> We in bilingual education have maintained, and will continue to maintain, that ESL is a vital part of any educational program for children whose dominant language is not English. (Peña 1976:17)

Since ESL is a necessary component of bilingual education, making the instruction as efficient and effective as possible is important for the effectiveness of bilingual education as a whole.

As for the first criticism regarding the use of ESL as a tool for Americanization, I believe that much progress has already been made in this area. The fact that certain school districts provide monies for bilingual education; the fact that numerous states have legislation for bilingual education; the fact that numerous states provide support for bilingual education even without a mandate; the fact that the Lau v Nichols[3] case was decided as it was--all these examples show an awareness

[3]The Office of Civil Rights guidelines for fulfilling Lau, however, have contributed to the confusion on the part of many school administrators concerning the relationship between ESL and bilingual programs by their ambiguous statements about ESL. (Office 1975:6)

and a sensitivity on all levels of our society that children have a right to an education no matter what their linguistic or cultural background. This awareness--late though it may be--is just a beginning. It is now up to us at the individual level to sensitize our co-workers to the rights of the minorities and to praise the advantages and the richness of living in a multicultural/multilingual society. At the local level

we must continue to work with school boards to convince them that, althbugh ESL instruction is necessary (some school boards have not yet admitted that), its purpose is not to transform the monolingual Japanese speaker, for example, to a monolingual English speaker who talks, acts, and lives just like American children his age; but rather to make the child bilingual, an asset in most countries in the world except ours. Furthermore, it is up to us at the state and national levels, through professional organizations such as TESOL and NABE and through our legislators, to make it known that, for us, living in the U.S. does not mean being part of a society whose members are identical, but being part of a society composed of varied cultures and languages that can co-exist and thrive.

As for the second criticism regarding legislation for bilingual programs whose main thrust is the acquisition of English, I can only repeat what I stated previously. Using the legal foothold we have already establised, we must use our voices--individually and collectively through professional organizations--to make legislators aware of our belief that transitional bilingual programs, although a step in the right direction, are not enough. Maintenance bilingual programs are desirable not only for the rights of those individuals from non-English-speaking backgrounds (and ideally for native English speakers as well), but also for the enrichment of the entire fabric of our society. Only a brief comparison of the U.S. educational system with bilingual education currently in operation in such countries as Canada and Russia is necessary to show how behind the U.S. really is in educational philosophy and practical application.

As for the third multi-faceted criticism of the failure of the ESL component in certain bilingual programs, numerous suggestions can be made. With regard to the role of evaluators, these evaluators must have a sound understanding of second language acquisition theory before they presume to judge that component of a bilingual program. With regard to the role of students, although it may be impossible to alter drastically the travel patterns of families of students enrolled in our programs, direct and frequent communication with the home regarding the importance of regular school attendance may serve to reduce the prolonged absences. Perhaps most important is the role of the bilingual teacher with regard to the ESL component. Bilingual teachers untrained in ESL can voluntarily take courses available at local universities throughout the country in such areas as ESL methods and materials, second language acquisition theory, and English structure. Further, bilingual teacher training programs, such as those funded by Title VII ESEA, should require several such courses for the preparation of bilingual teachers. Finally, state certification boards could require certain ESL courses, certificates, or degrees for all those engaged in teaching ESL. Such a quality control is necessary for a strong ESL component.

In conclusion, I hold that the teaching of English as a second language is an essential and valid component of any bilingual program in the U.S. That it has been misused in the past is not a reason to abandon it. It is the responsibility of those engaged in bilingual education to recognize, first, why problems have existed with regard to ESL instruction and, second, to rectify those problems to make ESL instruction as professional and as effective as possible. The progress of bilingual education as a whole relies on the validity of each of its

components--be they math or science taught in the students' native language; Spanish, Greek, or Japanese taught as a continuing language; culture; or English as a second language. I repeat, the strength of the whole--that is, bilingual education--lies in the strength of each of its parts, ESL being one of them.

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