

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 450

FL 027 486

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TITLE Bilingual Education: The Problem of Ambiguity and Poor Professional Development.  
PUB DATE 2002-05-00  
NOTE 13p.  
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142)  
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Bilingual Education; Educational Legislation; Elementary Secondary Education; English (Second Language); Faculty Development; Immigrants; Language Proficiency; Second Language Learning; Spanish; \*Vocabulary  
IDENTIFIERS Bilingual Education Act 1968; Bilingual Education Act 1984; Bilingual Education Act 1994

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ambiguity in defining terms within the field of bilingual education, noting problems with poor professional development available to teachers selected to participate in bilingual education programs. The first section discusses terminology within bilingual education programs, focusing on the following: transitional bilingual education program, English immersion, English as a Second Language, English Language learners, and two-way bilingual education/dual language program. The second section examines historical problems with bilingual education (e.g., federal legislation, limited finances, and student evaluation methods). The third section presents results from a survey that asked elementary teachers about the bilingual program used at their school. Overall, teachers were confused about many aspects of their programs. Half did not know what program the school used. Nearly all believed that one language dominated instruction in a bilingual class (some believed it was Spanish and some believed it was English). Most teachers thought that transitional bilingual programs allowed students to become literate in both languages (though they actually help students become English-proficient as quickly as possible). Half of the teachers believed that students who neither spoke Spanish nor were proficient in English had been misplaced in a Spanish/English bilingual class. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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# Bilingual Education: The Problem of Ambiguity and Poor Professional Development

Griselda Peña

**Abstract:** This article describes the problems of ambiguity among the many defining terms within the field of bilingual education. It also addressed the problem of poor professional development available among the educators selected to use these programs. It includes research on how much knowledge teachers possess about bilingual education. It proposes that in order for bilingual education to better implemented the definition by the particular school needs to be available to all teachers in that facility. It also suggest that it is necessary to provide better professional development for all teachers that work in an environment that teaches bilingual education.

## Introduction

Bilingual Education is something that has intrigued me since heard about it. I myself was a child who did not speak any English when I entered school. I thought the school I attended did not provide any form of Bilingual Education. I was in an English class all day. I did attend special English As a Second Language to develop my English language skills. However, I did not associate this with a Bilingual Education program.

As a teacher I entered the school system believing that Bilingual Education hindered learning English, which is important in the United States to succeed. I had no background in education nor did I understand anything about the Bilingual Education Program. I was offered the opportunity to teach a second grade bilingual class and I jumped at the chance. I was convinced that as someone who had overcome a language barrier I would be able to help these children become proficient in English.

When I entered the classroom I did not know how the Bilingual Education program worked in general never mind in this particular school. The ESL coordinator did little for the first two months to explain how my daily schedule should be divided into

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English or Spanish instruction time. For these first two months I taught in whatever language that I found the materials readily available.

Then one day the English As a Second Language Specialist handed me a schedule. It clearly stated what part of the day was to be in English and what part was to be conducted in Spanish. I was also told when I would teach specific English Language skills. My class was homogeneously grouped and attended different reading groups. Some of my students went to Spanish reading classes while others attended English-speaking classes. (How this was determined remains a mystery). While this made my planning easier, I had a few questions. How was I to implement this program properly when my class was grouped this way? The program mandated that students who were in the English language class should receive the rest of the daily instructions in Spanish and those that had received Spanish reading classes were to be taught in English for the other periods.

As a professional and due to my personal history I became extremely interested in educating myself about Bilingual Education. As I started to research this topic I discovered so many ambiguities and terms that simply confused me. These were terms that are often used interchangeably. What follows is a list of terms that will facilitate what is really being described when discussing the huge field called Bilingual Education. This excluded math, social studies, and science, which were only taught in Spanish.

### ***Terminology within Bilingual Education Programs***

New York City opens its doors to many immigrants each year. These immigrants have a right to educate themselves and their children. While it is necessary to communicate in English to succeed in the United States and all agree that English needs

to be taught to the immigrant children, there are many debates as to the best method to teach English. Under the huge umbrella of Bilingual Education there are many different methods striving toward the same goal (Freeman, p.5).

One of the programs used through out New York is the **Transitional Bilingual Education Program**. According to the definition used by Freeman, Transitional Bilingual Education is a program that provides instruction for some subjects in the students' native language but a certain amount of each day is spent on developing English skills. Classes are made up of students who share the same native language (Freeman, p. 4).

Some schools may only provide **English Immersion**. In an English Immersion class the instruction is entirely in English. The classroom teachers strive to deliver lessons in simplified English so that students learn English and academic subjects.

Schools with a very diverse student body may opt to have **English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Learners (ELL)**. This type of setting may be the same as immersion but also may include some support to individuals in their native tongue. Typically these classes are comprised of students who speak many different languages but are not fluent in English. They may attend special classes to develop English skills for only a period a day or attend for a full day and focus both on academics and English (Freeman, p. 4).

Still many progressive schools are investing time and energy into a **Two-way Bilingual Education or Dual Language Program**. In these classrooms instruction is given in two languages to students. Students who may be dominant in one language or the other are taught in the same class with the goal that students' will become proficient

in both languages. The program varies in how they allocate two languages for instructional purposes (Freeman, p.5).

All of these terms that make up the education of the immigrant student have been changing over a long period of time. Over the years there have been many debates regarding education of immigrant students. The political affairs of the United States affected public opinion and policies affecting the schools. For example, during the World War I the general public became suspicious of non-English speakers. As a result, by the mid 1920s, many states enacted English – only instruction laws. The emphasis was on *Americanizing* immigrants and creating strong loyal bonds. Despite this, these restrictions were found unconstitutional and many believed that to allow students to “sink or swim” on their own would make a mockery of the public education system.

### ***Historical Problems with of Bilingual Education***

Along with the many debates there have been many government-imposed laws protecting people’s rights. The federal government felt it was necessary to make laws that would also protect the integrity of the educational system. In 1968 the federal government passed The *Bilingual Educational Act*. This is the first official recognition that students with limited English ability needed more from the educational system. This act provided federal funding to incorporate native language instruction. This law made it economically possible for educators to obtain the resources necessary to instruct students in their native language. This solved the economic problems regarding obtaining resources. However, problems persisted. Over the next twenty years schools underwent four reauthorizations with amendments (Stewner-Manzanares, p. 1).

In 1974 The Bilingual Education Act was amended for the first time. It was in this year that the government specified the definition of what is meant by a bilingual education program. “The act defined bilingual education program as one that provided instruction in English and in the native language of the student to allow the student to progress effectively through the educational systems. English as a second language programs alone were considered insufficient” (Stewner-Manzanares, 4). The government felt it was necessary to define the program’s goal, which is to prepare students to merge into a regular classroom as quickly as possible. In this same year the Supreme Court passed the *Equal Educational Opportunity Act*. This law required that schools take “affirmative steps” to overcome language barriers.

While these government laws were being created to protect students’ needs, the economic state of the country effected how these laws were going to be implemented. The government granted funds to support the programs but the dire financial conditions of the United States at the time threatened the integrity of the program. Committees were created to evaluate the success of the program and the second amendment arose.

The second amendment was passed. As of 1978 bilingual education was extended to not only students of limited English speaking ability but to those who were of “limited English proficiency” (Stewner-Manzanares, 5). This allowed students who could speak a little English but could not read or write at grade level to participate. Again the amendment emphasized the desire to have these students enter into a regular classroom as quickly as possible. By the end of 1978 it was clear that the increased number of programs were becoming costly for the federal government.

The Bilingual Education Act of 1984 addressed the need for increased flexibility in the implementation of programs for limited English proficient students. It proposed to give the local government more freedom in deciding how the students should be taught. School districts were able to use the funds allocated to implement various teaching strategies. While this amendment allocated funds for different programs, all programs did not receive an equal percentage of the government funds. After this act was enacted 75 percent of funds were still allocated to Transitional Bilingual Education programs. Other programs still received federal grants such as Developmental Bilingual Education (where English language instruction is combined with a second language to achieve competence in both English and a second language), and Special Alternative Instructional program (where the native language need not be used but special instructional services need to be provided).

Ten years later, in 1988 another amendment was enacted. This amendment was concerned with the diversity of the limited English proficiency students. The Secretary of Education, William Bennett, called for the pluralistic approach. It allowed the local school districts to provide more cultural and language specific programs. The diversity of the students across the United States made the federal government realize that individual school districts needed more autonomy in deciding how to best teach the children of that region. Under this new amendment up to 25 percent of grant funds could be allotted for alternative programs.

During all these years many problems arose due to the form of assessments used by individual institutions. In the 1940s testers recognized that standardized tests presented special problems for children from foreign language backgrounds (McLean, 3).

Concern arose that the standardized test were not fair for children from a different language and cultural background. Federal and state laws attempted to protect the rights of culturally and linguistically diverse students. In the 1970's, years later major court cases influenced the testing of these students. One such case was the Diana v. California State Board of Education. Nine Mexican-American students had been placed in Special Education programs after having been tested in English. Initially they had stated that their native language was Spanish. The court ruled that children need to be tested in their native language and some form of nonverbal form of assessment as an extension to the assessment. Another such case was the Lau vs. Nichols. This was a case brought to court because a lawyer "learned that the son of one of his clients was failing because he did not know English" (Stewner-Manzanares, 3).

In the year 2002 the educational system is still debating how to properly assess bilingual students, to determine bilingual programs that work, and to solve the problems that arise when educating a country made up of immigrants. Although all these problems persist, the United States sees bilingual education as the solution to the language problem for students. It is believed that students catch up with the majority language when formal English instruction is introduced. How can educators who are not proficient themselves teach the language? Still the majority of the problem with bilingual education lies in the confusion over the interpretation of the many second language acquisitions by the school along with the lack of knowledge and professional development of the teachers hired to implement these programs.

One strong critique of the bilingual education, Ron Unz, states the decree signed between the New York City Board of Education and Aspira requires that students who



speaking limited English be taught mostly in their native language. While Unz does not disagree that some students may benefit from a bilingual program, he believes these programs are best suited for older or teenage immigrant students. The fact is that many of the bilingual students are American born and another large portion arrived as infants. One problem is that these students sometimes linger in bilingual classrooms for years unless their parents insist on placing them in a monolingual classroom.

In 1998 the effectiveness of the bilingual education program was put to the test in California. Bilingual education programs were replaced with English immersion classrooms. Bilingual education advocates predicted academic disaster. However, the “mean percentile scores in standardized tests for Spanish-speaking students rose” (Unz, 2001, *Bilingual Education Lives On*).

While Unz argues the need for the bilingual education program, in New York he faces many advocates for the program to remain. City officials are constantly faced with pressures from bilingual education teachers and advocates to leave the programs intact and the media suggests that something needs to be done. Maybe the first step in this debate is a reform that will provide better professional development for bilingual educators and hire better-qualified teachers for this task.

### ***Results from the Survey***

The level of confusion about Bilingual Education was evident at one school where ten teachers were asked questions regarding the bilingual education program used in the school where they taught. The school is an elementary school, grades two through four. A list of definitions for the different programs was provided. The following is a list of

results to questions regarding Bilingual Education. The teachers work in an environment where a Transitional Bilingual Program and English as a Second Language are used:

- Four out of ten could define which program the school used. One out of ten believed the school had a variety of programs including Dual Language. Five out of ten didn't know what program was used even with the programs defined.
- Nine out of ten teachers strongly agreed that there is a language that dominates instruction in a bilingual class. In this particular school some teachers believed that Spanish dominated instruction while others thought English did.
- Eight out of ten strongly agreed that Transitional Bilingual Programs allow students to become literate in both languages.
- Five out of ten strongly agreed that students that speak neither Spanish nor are proficient in English have been misplaced in a Spanish/English Bilingual class. Five out of ten felt students were properly placed.

These results demonstrate the confusion that educators themselves have over the Bilingual Education Program. Five out of ten teachers in this school could not even name the program that is available to the students they teach. Where the majority of the population is a minority and over one third are not native English speakers it is alarming that the teachers do not know what program is used in the school. One out of the ten said the school provided more programs than it actually did and the other half did not know what bilingual programs are used in a particular school.

While some may argue that is something that only concerns the bilingual educators and the bilingual students, it is something that concerns all teachers in that school. The Enrichment teachers who teach specific subjects should be informed about which bilingual programs are used and what their role is within that program. Are they teaching the only English portion of the day for those students? If so, are they responsible to provide Language skills as well?

It is not surprising that eight out of ten teachers believed that the bilingual Transitional Program allows students to become literate in both languages. Many teachers view this as the goal of a bilingual program. However, the Transitional Program's main goal is to help the students become proficient in English as quickly as possible. This is quite different from the Dual Language Programs that seek to have two groups from different linguistic backgrounds working towards gaining knowledge of the others' language.

Nine out of ten teachers felt that one language dominates classroom instruction. However, whether the language that dominates is English or the student's native language this statement does not agree with the previous statement that the Bilingual Education Program allows student to become literate in both languages. How can students that are mostly exposed to one language over another become proficient in both languages? Furthermore, five out of ten stated that Spanish dominates instruction in this particular school. The Transitional Bilingual Program's primary goal is to have students become proficient in English as quickly as possible. How is this achieved quickly if students are only minimally exposed to the language they are to become proficient in?

Five out of ten teachers claimed that students were properly placed in a language appropriate class. When these teachers were informally asked what were the criteria for a child to be placed in a Transitional Bilingual program, they were not certain. Some believed that the program was only for those whose parent's native language was Spanish and the children were not exposed English at home. This does not explain the children who speak limited English but are not proficient in Spanish either. If the child has no reading skills in his or her native language, how does the school decide if that child will

benefit more from a transitional program and not form an English as a Second Language program?

### ***Conclusions***

There are three things that are clear from this research.

First teachers are confused about the definition of bilingual education. Educators are confused about the many defining terms surrounding the bilingual education program. Second, teachers do not know what program the school uses. Many educators aren't even sure what program(s) are used in the school where they work. Finally, it is clear that teachers do not receive adequate professional development.

### ***Recommendations***

Based on the history and the nature of the programs available for students that have special language needs, teachers need to be better prepared to serve this need. It is clear that New York City has a huge teacher shortage and it must also be difficult to find proficient bilingual teachers. However, Bilingual Education programs need to provide better professional development for the teachers that are working in these positions. Some first year teachers with no experience in bilingual education and no special certification are placed in to teach bilingual classes if there is a need.

Furthermore non-bilingual teachers, who also teach these children, also need to be a part of the professional development so that they understand their role as enrichment teachers. It is extremely important for these teachers to know that their part instruction serves as language development. This realization might lead them to change their lessons so that they are geared toward teaching the subject while simultaneously enhancing the children's language skill needs.

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