

The Latino Students' Attitudes, Perceptions, and Views on Bilingual Education

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Abstract

In light of the continuing debate surrounding bilingual education, there has been a renewed interest to examine the perceptions and views on the subject from various constituents. The purpose of this study was to examine the group who is the target of and most affected by this controversy—English language learners. The study surveyed 280 Latino students, all of whom were enrolled in bilingual classes, including Spanish maintenance and sheltered classes, in seven urban middle schools in Southern California, in regard to their attitudes, perceptions, and views on bilingual education. The study found that an overwhelming majority (90%) of the students surveyed believed that bilingual education was helpful to their educational experience and 86% supported the offering of bilingual education programs in public schools. Interestingly, however, if given a choice, 53% of the students responded that they would prefer to be in non-bilingual classes. Nevertheless, almost three-quarters (71%) of the subjects reported that bilingual education supported their cognitive and emotional development, suggesting the psycho-affective benefits beyond language development for English language learners.

Introduction

In spite of the federal government's enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Bilingual Education Act of 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Lau v. Nichols* in 1974, and numerous landmark cases supporting equal access to education for all students, controversy surrounding the development and implementation of bilingual education programs in public schools continues in both the political and educational arenas. To some Americans, the bilingual education debate is one about conceptual obscurity in defining an American

identity. That is, there is a sense of language nativism that "to be American is to speak English." Thus, the manifestation of the English-only movements has been one motivated not only by the desire to protect English as the dominant and "official" language of the United States but to equate the language with Americanism.

In 1986, through a referendum known as Proposition 63, Californians voted to declare English as the official language of the state. Since then, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, and several other states followed suit in proclaiming English as the official language of the state through ballots and constitutional amendments. The U.S. English group, whose main political agenda was to promulgate English as the official language at the federal and state levels, advocated these ballot initiatives to ensure that the country operates as a monolingual (English-speaking) society (Crawford, 1995).

In June 1998, Californian voters passed Proposition 227 known as the "English-only" initiative, disallowing public schools from offering bilingual instruction in the classroom without exempted status from the state. This proposition was drafted by Ron Unz (1998), an entrepreneur, in response to his perception that bilingual education programs in California were ineffective. According to Unz, bilingual education programs failed to support the linguistic needs of language-minority students to develop a high level of proficiency in English to perform well in school. Unz added that the presence of language-minority students in bilingual education programs contributed to the declining test scores. Shortly after the decision in California, Arizona passed an even more restrictive anti-bilingual ballot, Proposition 203, in 2000, disallowing the use of any language other than English in public schools. Voters in Massachusetts also approved dismantling of bilingual education programs in public schools in 2002. Although these propositions contain some provisions for waivers and exceptions, they are for the most part conspicuous and ambiguous to both teachers and parents.

While rationales and objectives for bilingual education—by design and intent—are quite well known in the academic community, there is a segment of the population, as evident by decisions made by voters in Arizona, California, and Massachusetts, who hold steadfast to their view on bilingual education based on conformist mentality. That is, many opponents of bilingual education believe that a language other than English is an "obstacle" rather than an asset to the individual and the society at large. This attitude and perception, based on the "deficit" view of non-dominant languages and cultures, have served to motivate some interest groups to advance a political agenda under the guise of providing equal opportunity for minority groups, who, coincidentally, are fast becoming the majority in certain geographic regions and demographic categories in the United States.

In the past couple of decades, there have been several studies conducted on the parents' views and perceptions of bilingual education (e.g., Aguirre, 1984; Garza, 1992; Lee, 1999; Lee & Shin, 1996; Shin, 1994; Shin & Kim, 1996; Torres, 1988; Young & Tran, 2000). Lee (1999) reported that approximately 76% of the Latino parents surveyed ($N = 290$) supported the use of Spanish and English to teach their children in the classroom. Shin and Kim (1996) also found similar results—70% of the Korean parents responded ($N = 256$) that they would like both Korean and English to be used for instructional purposes. Considering that it is the parents of language-minority students (*vis-à-vis* the public at large) who are most likely to possess vested interest in bilingual education, it is quite appropriate and pertinent that perceptions and attitudes of language-minority parents are examined.

Unfortunately, policy decisions on bilingual education have generally been made by politicians or the community at large based on influences from special interest groups, whose primary interest may not be the pedagogical value embedded in bilingual education but one based on adherence to a partisan social ideology—protecting English. Such assumption or belief stems from the view that bilingual education encourages social friction or disharmony. That is, there is a prevailing perception and attitude that a language other than English in the United States is a threat to national unity and character. As a result, these policies and perceptions, based on ideological predispositions, have effectively contradicted both academic research and educational practice.

Perhaps most important but absent in the debate on whether to continue or discontinue bilingual education is the population who is at the crux of these discussions—the students whose first or dominant language is not English. Whereas in the past social and cultural assimilation was widely accepted as the core mission of public schools, it has become quite apparent to many scholars and educators that providing language and cultural support to language-minority students is critical to their ability to access the core curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, changing trends in teaching and learning objectives, as well as reconceptualization of pedagogical frameworks—from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning—coincided with and supported the movement to develop course syllabi and lesson plans that placed learners at the core of instructional discourse. Thus, it has become critical for schools to be intentionally inclusive of all students, including language-minority students, in providing student-centered learning.

Among proponents of bilingual education, the disproportionate number of dropouts among Latino students serves as empirical evidence that the lack of language and cultural support in the schools attributes to the unusually high percentage of Latino students leaving schools (e.g., Curiel, Rosenthal, & Richek, 1986; McMillen & Schumacher, 1997). According to Friedenbergl (2002), Latino students have surpassed African American students in the rate of high

school dropouts in the United States. Curiel and colleagues (1986), through comparing the dropout rates between those who had 1 or more years of bilingual education ($n = 86$) and those who did not ($n = 90$), found that the dropout rate for the former group was significantly low (24% vs. 43%). This finding suggests that participation in bilingual education may reduce incidents of school dropout for English language learners. In addition, a study by Jay Greene (1998) found that limited English proficient students who participated in classes that offered native language instruction performed better on standardized tests than their counterparts who were taught only in English.

Interestingly, however, a segment of the population, including Ron Unz, an influential opponent of bilingual education, subscribes to what Richard Ruiz called the "language as problem" conception rather than "language as right" or "language as resource" view. As a result, the "language as problem" has become "language is problem" to critics of bilingual education, leading to political and academic debate in spite of numerous rulings that provide civil rights, as well as empirical evidence showing the benefits of bilingual education (e.g., Greene, 1998; Krashen, 1996; Lee, 2002; Willig, 1985). Ironically, people opposed to bilingual education have also cited high dropout rates and low school achievement among Latino students as an argument against bilingual education, confounding the issue as if the controversy is solely academic-based and not politically motivated.

Purpose of the Study

The benefits of language and cultural maintenance are well established (e.g., Baker, 2001; Crawford, 1995; Cummins, 2001; Freeman, 1998; Krashen, 1996; Lee, 1999; Willig, 1985, etc.). Nonetheless, accompanying the rapid rise in the number of speakers of Spanish and other languages is the political interest to propagate the notion that a language other than English has no place in the United States.

While there is a plethora of studies related to parental views on bilingual education, the language-minority students—the most important group in the learning community—have largely been ignored. The purpose of this study was to examine the Latino students' views and attitudes about bilingual education, particularly as it relates to the student's preference for bilingual education, and their perception of bilingual education, and the influence of bilingual education on their cognitive, affective, and psycho-social development. Thus, this study was an attempt to better understand the issue from the group that is most affected by policies on bilingual education. In addition, the study compares the results from previous studies on language-minority parents whose children were enrolled in bilingual education programs to examine any similarities and differences that may exist between students and parents.

Method

Sample

The subjects for this study were randomly selected from seven urban middle schools (Grades 6–8), three of which offered school-wide bilingual education programs, in Southern California. The remaining four schools offered sheltered/transitional bilingual classes. Of the 307 questionnaires collected, 27 were excluded due to grossly incomplete or invalid responses (more than half the questions were left unanswered); thus, the sample for this study was 280 (157 from students enrolled in school-wide programs and 123 from students participating in class-wide programs). Of the total, 248 indicated that they spoke Spanish as their primary language, 24 identified English as their primary language, 6 cited both Spanish and English, and 2 declined to respond to this question. There was a direct correlation between length of residency and identification of a primary language. Those who identified English as their primary language have been in the United States for an average of 12 years, those who indicated both English and Spanish as their primary language have resided in the United States for 11 years on average, and those who considered themselves as primarily speakers of Spanish have lived in the United States on an average of 6 years. However, more than half of the subjects ($n = 154$) preferred the English version of the questionnaire to the Spanish version.

Stimuli

The multiple-choice questionnaire, written in English and Spanish, contained 16 questions, 3 of which were follow-up questions, the completion of which depended on the responses. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 23 middle school students for accuracy and appropriateness of the language used in the survey. In addition, the questionnaire was reviewed by four university professors, all whom possessed native-like proficiency in Spanish, to determine the accuracy of translation of English to Spanish.

Procedure

Either a research assistant or classroom teachers distributed the questionnaire to the subjects during class. Both the research assistant and cooperating classroom teachers provided survey instructions in English and Spanish. The research assistant and teachers, who were available for the entire duration of the survey session to assist with questions related to completing the survey, collected the questionnaires at the end of the session. Most subjects took less than 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Results

Of the 280 subjects who participated in the study, approximately two thirds responded that they understood the goals or objectives of bilingual education. Of those who indicated that they understood the objectives of bilingual education, almost half (43%) responded that it was to help students to develop both English and Spanish. Thirty-one percent indicated that it was to help students to develop English, 6% answered that it was to help students to develop Spanish, and 20% did not respond to this question. Presumably, approximately 20% did not understand the goals of bilingual education (see Appendix B).

In regards to what language(s) teachers should use to teach Spanish-speaking students, almost two thirds (74%) of the subjects responded that teachers should use both English and Spanish. Twenty-one percent indicated that only English should be used, and only 5% believed that teachers should use Spanish exclusively; thus, the majority of the subjects surveyed supported the use of two languages in the classroom, correlating to their perception of the objectives of bilingual education.

Subjects were asked if they thought instruction in their primary language, Spanish, delayed the development of English; 59% of the subjects responded that teaching in Spanish could cause a delay in the development of English. Support for using two languages in the classroom was significantly higher—more than two thirds (79%) believed that learning in two languages did not impede the development of English (see Appendix A). An overwhelming majority (69%) expressed their aspiration to develop both English and Spanish (see Appendix B), consistent with their view that teachers should use two languages for instruction and their belief that using two languages did not impede their English development. A modest 25% of the subjects surveyed indicated their desire to develop only English skills and a mere 5% expressed an interest to develop language proficiency exclusively in Spanish. Because the language proficiency of the subjects could not be verified, this study could not substantiate whether or not their linguistic competency in either English or Spanish influenced their language development aspirations. There were no significant differences between students enrolled in school-wide maintenance bilingual programs and class-wide sheltered/transitional bilingual programs.

In regards to the subjects' perception of whether or not bilingual education was supportive of their educational experience, 90% of the subjects affirmed that bilingual education was indeed supportive; only 10% thought that it did not help with their educational experience (see Appendix A). When subjects were asked if they believed participating in a bilingual education program/class affected their self-esteem or self-confidence levels, almost two thirds (71%) responded that bilingual education did not affect their self-esteem or self-confidence levels, positively or negatively. Of those who indicated that

bilingual education affected their self-esteem or self-confidence levels, 46% thought that it helped to increase their esteem and confidence levels, 10% responded that it actually decreased their esteem and confidence levels, and 44% declined to respond to this question. Interestingly, however, almost two thirds (71%) responded that bilingual education was supportive of their cognitive and emotional well being, confirming the subjects' view that bilingual education was supportive of their educational experience.

Despite their support for use of two languages in the classroom, more than one third (38%) believed that their English proficiency would be superior if they were not enrolled in bilingual education, 34% responded that their English proficiency would not be superior, and 27% indicated that it would not make a difference. On the contrary, almost two out of three (63%) responded that their Spanish would not be superior if they were not enrolled in a bilingual program/class, confirming that bilingual education facilitated the students' development of Spanish. Interestingly, however, one out of four (26%) believed that their Spanish would actually be superior if they did not participate in the bilingual program or class.

There was an overwhelming support for bilingual education. The majority (86%) indicated their support for bilingual education—only 12% did not support bilingual education (Appendix A). In spite of the subject's high support for bilingual education, more than half (53%) responded that they would prefer to be in non-bilingual education classes, if given a choice, suggesting assessment or placement issues. That is, there may be a high percentage of students who believed that their language skills—English or Spanish, or both—were incomparable to their peers in the bilingual classes. Of those who expressed their preference to be in non-bilingual classes, 16% indicated that they believed non-bilingual classes were more effective, 13% believed that non-bilingual classes would help them to maintain and develop their Spanish, 11% responded that regular classes were more interesting, and 8% expressed their interest to be with their friends. Just 1 out of 10 (12%) marked "all of the above" reasons and almost half (40%) declined to respond this question (see Figure 1).

Among those who responded that they preferred to be in bilingual education classes, 18% expressed an interest to maintain and develop their heritage language, 12% thought that bilingual classes were more interesting, 10% believed that bilingual education classes were instructionally more effective, and 4% wanted to be with their friends. Eleven percent cited all of the above reasons and almost half (45%) declined to provide responses (see Figure 2).

Discussion

The sample consisted of subjects who were participants of bilingual education. Their perceptions and views are based on their own experience as students of bilingual education in public schools. Several interesting observations can be made from the results of the survey. First, it is worthwhile to note that what students perceived to be their primary language did not seem to correspond to their literacy skills. That is, although 248 subjects (88%) indicated Spanish as their primary language, more than half (55%) preferred to complete the survey written in English. Thus, there appears to be a disparity between the subjects' verbal ability and their literacy skills in Spanish.

Among opponents of bilingual education, there is a common misperception that bilingual education is "instruction in the native language." This study did not support that perception: Almost half (43%) thought that objectives of bilingual education were to support the development of two languages, English and Spanish, and one third (31%) believed that bilingual education was to help them develop English-language skills. In fact, of those who responded that they knew or understood the objectives of bilingual education, only 6% responded that bilingual education was to support the development of exclusively their primary language. Thus, the perception that bilingual education takes away the opportunity to develop proficiency in English was virtually unfounded in this study. Furthermore, the fact that a disproportionate percentage of subjects in the study elected to complete the English survey, coupled with a mere 6% who believed that the objectives of bilingual education were to facilitate Spanish development, suggests that bilingual education students may not be receiving a significant amount of instruction in Spanish—contrary to the perception projected by opponents of bilingual education.

Questions 3, 4, and 5 dealt with students' views on language choice and its influences on instructional processes (see Appendix A). The results seem very consistent. The Latino students' support for use of two languages in the classroom (74%) correlated with their perception that learning in two languages did not interfere with the development of English (79%). Consistent with their perception of the objectives of bilingual education, the subjects' support for use of the primary language by teachers was minimal (4%). Interestingly, the percentage of students who supported the use of English and Spanish in the classroom was almost identical to that of linguistic minority parents found in studies reported by Lee (1999) (76%) and Baratz-Snowden, Rock, Pollack, and Wilder (1998) (70%). The students' support for using only their primary language, Spanish, was very low (4%), which also coincided with parents (3%) who supported Spanish-only instruction (Lee, 1999).

The Latino students' aspirations to develop bilingualism are extremely high (69%), correlating very closely to their support for using two languages

for classroom instruction by teachers (74%). In fact, the result that the percentage of those who indicated their desire to develop only English (25%) is consistent with the percentage of those who supported the use of English exclusively in the classroom (21%) seems to suggest that students believed that a particular language used in the classroom influenced the development of a certain language. Interestingly, but expectedly, a slightly higher percentage of those subjects who completed the questionnaire written in Spanish aspired to develop English than those who completed the English questionnaire (31% vs. 20%).

Perhaps the most striking data in this study are the view that bilingual education is helpful to their educational experience (90%). This correlates very well with their support for bilingual education (86%). However, although 71% felt that bilingual education was supportive of their cognitive and affective well-being, 71% did not feel that bilingual education affected their self-esteem or self-confidence levels, positively or negatively. Considering that a great percentage (44%) of those who responded that bilingual education influenced their self-esteem and self-confidence levels did not indicate whether bilingual education helped to increase or decrease these levels, it is possible that these subjects, who are adolescents, were uncertain about their identity. Interestingly, a higher percentage of those subjects who completed the English version of the questionnaire (78%) than those who completed the Spanish version (62%) felt that bilingual education was supportive of their cognitive and emotional well-being. Thus, it appears that bilingual education may be providing greater psychological support for the more proficient English speakers.

The data on the subjects' view on whether or not their English proficiency would be superior if they were not enrolled in a bilingual program are particularly noteworthy—more than one third (38%) responded affirmatively to this question. Thus, given that the majority (74%) supported the use of two languages in the classroom, and that 79% did not believe learning in two languages impeded the development of English, there may be issues in regards to program placement. In fact, the data on their preference to be in non-bilingual classes (53%) seem to support this hypothesis. A previous study on linguistic minority parents (Lee, 1999) revealed a similar result—two thirds of the parents whose children were enrolled in bilingual classrooms preferred to place their children in non-bilingual classes if given a choice. Considering that parents overwhelmingly supported bilingual education, stigma attached to bilingual education has been raised as a potential variable influencing the parents' preferences to place their children in non-bilingual classes. This study found no evidence of stigmatism among students—only 10% thought that bilingual education lowered their self-esteem or self-confidence levels. Thus, it appears that issues related to language assessment are a critical variable in bilingual education. In fact, Chavez (1991) and Porter (1991) cited

“misplacement” as an issue in bilingual education—(mis)placement of students who were fluent in English in bilingual classes. Nevertheless, further study is needed to fully understand the factors that contribute to the students’ and parents’ preferences for English-only classes.

Conclusions

As the number of students whose primary language is not English continues to rise, the schools’ ability to provide subject matter knowledge and literacy skills to English language learners has become an educational priority. Unfortunately, bilingual education, based on the principle of providing access to the core curriculum through the use of a familiar language, while facilitating the development of another language, has become a target of intense political and social debate. In recent years, a form of submersion, or euphemistically called “immersion,” has gained popular support in many states.

Perhaps bilingual education is the only education-related ballot that has been introduced to the public with neither a legislative bill nor a department of education endorsement. Considering that opposition to bilingual education has been more about political and social ideology than about efficacy (although opponents of bilingual education may claim otherwise), the re-emergence of urgency to end bilingual education in the public schools by unconventional means is an example of the current political stream in the United States.

Opponents of bilingual education in the United States have been quite successful in establishing and projecting an image that bilingual education leads to various social problems, including the “erosion of English.” This is contrary to global trends where most countries—even those that are considered homogeneous and monolithic—are exerting policies and practices to promote bilingualism and multilingualism among their citizenry. There is much evidence (e.g., Laosa, 1975; Lee, 2002; López, 1978; Skrabanek, 1970; Veltman, 1983) to suggest that inter-generational loss of heritage language is more a social issue than the status of English among speakers of two or more languages.

Parental support for bilingual education has been well documented (e.g., Garza, 1992; Lee, 1999; Shin, 1994; Lee & Shin, 1996; Torres, 1988; Youssef & Simpkins, 1985). This study found an overwhelming support for bilingual education from a group who has largely been ignored in the debate—the students participating in bilingual education programs. The study revealed that the majority of the subjects surveyed supported the use of two languages in the classroom, hoped to develop fluency in two languages, and thought that bilingual education facilitated their educational experience and helped to increase their cognitive and emotional well-being. At the same time, there were a relatively high percentage of students who believed that their English

proficiency would be superior if they were not enrolled in bilingual education (38%) and those who preferred to be in non-bilingual education classes (53%) if given a choice. It appears support for bilingual education, particularly for dual immersion-type program, is very high for both students and parents.

In discussing issues related to validity of polls, Rossell and Baker (1996) stated that many subjects who participated in surveys did not understand what bilingual education is. A study on linguistic minority parents' perceptions and views on bilingual education (Lee, 1999) confirmed that although many parents indicated that they knew or understood the objectives of bilingual education, only a few (6 out of 290 subjects) really knew the different models or programs of bilingual education. Krashen (1996), in his analysis of discrepancies in parents' responses to various questions on studies conducted by Shin and Kim (1996) and Lee and Shin (1996), concluded that "people ... in reality [are] not opposed to the idea of bilingual education, but are opposed to certain practices or are opposed to regulations connected to bilingual education." Hence, while parents' view on bilingual education is significant, the issue related to whether or not parents fully understand what bilingual education is cannot be totally dismissed.

On the contrary, the views of those students who are participants of bilingual education are subject to less ambiguity; that is, their understanding of the objectives of bilingual education takes secondary importance to what they have experienced as participants of bilingual education. The study has revealed that among bilingual education students, bilingual education is highly supported. In addition, the study has found that bilingual education facilitates the students' cognitive and emotional well-being—those variables that may be closely related to school dropout.

The results of the study do not convey that bilingual education programs are perfect. In fact, the subject's desire to be placed in non-bilingual classes in spite of their support for bilingual education suggests a need for improvement in student assessment and placement, or, at the very least, further study. Furthermore, the type of bilingual education program (i.e., maintenance, transitional, immersion, etc.) offered in the schools may influence the students' support for bilingual education and, more importantly, educational benefits received from it. Nevertheless, the study provides useful data that bilingual education is meeting most of the students' needs and expectations.

The purpose of this study was not to provide empirical evidence related to the effectiveness of bilingual education but to understand the students' views, perceptions, and attitudes on bilingual education. This study has revealed that students who have participated in bilingual education overwhelmingly support the offering of bilingual education in the public schools, and that the majority of the students in bilingual education have reported linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and emotional support—those variables critical to school success. The study suggests a need for social and educational corroboration based on examination of conceptual and programmatic efficacies

and not on xenophobic sentiments that language diversity is a threat and an obstacle to the unity of the country. Just as it would be uncivil to end education because of challenges and shortcomings, the debate on bilingual education should not be on the fate of program existence or demise but on improving the quality of and access to bilingual education programs.

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