Bilingual Education and the Effect on Social Interaction in Young Children

Peyton Cameron

Syracuse University

**Abstract**

Bilingual education is a method of achieving students proficient in two languages while maintaining the instruction of content necessary for each academic year. Bilingual education provides a myriad of benefits for students beyond increased career opportunities. Parents and students alike who have had direct contact with these programs have resounding approval for these programs.

**Introduction**

Bilingual education, particularly in the United States, is not the most popular topic because of institutionalized racism and anti-immigration sentiments surrounding these forms of education. This is demonstrated through legislation that has been implemented in states across the United States. For example, “[in] 2000, Proposition 203 English for the Children was approved by voters in Arizona- essentially terminating bilingual education services in favor of a monolithic sink-or-swim approach…” (Johnson p. 2). Proposition 203, and other legislation prohibiting bilingual education services are not uncommon in the United States. This approach to education is preparing non-English monolingual immigrant children for failure. The “sink-or-swim” approach places these children in a monolingual English classroom with no aid in translation or learning in their first language. This inevitably produces lower grades and test scores than their peers because the non-English speaking student is not learning the course material, due to the fact that they can’t understand the instructions given to them. It is not that these students are less intelligent, it is that they are not being taught properly because of the language barrier. However, even with the existence of legislation prohibiting it in schools, bilingual education is still used by parents and in homes internationally. This paper will explore the effects of bilingual education on a child.

**Different Forms of Bilingual Education**

Before diving into the effects of bilingual education, one must first understand the variants and programs that are encapsulated under the umbrella term. There are two frames of reference within bilingual education, the monoglossic language ideologies, and the heteroglossic language ideologies, as discussed by Flores & Beardsmore. These differ because the monoglossic ideologies take monolingualism as the norm and either add or subtract the second language from that, whereas the heteroglossic takes bilingualism as the standard and adjusts the education according. However, the heteroglossic does not always produce the proficient balanced bilinguals that its definition may suggest. “Therefore, in opposition to monoglossic language ideologies that treat bilingualism as double monolingualism…” (Flores & Beardsmore pg. 214). Heteroglossic ideologies may create bilinguals, but their bilingualism may result from a lack of interlanguage translation skills. This would mean that their two language sets would be working independently from each other. The languages would be separated with the child being able to express themselves in each language, but translating and changing languages may prove to be a challenge. It is as though they are monolinguals in two different languages.

Regardless of the double monolingualism theory, bilingual education is still relevant and important to parents raising their children bilingually. The form of bilingual education that this paper will focus on will be Two-way immersion programs (TWI). “TWI programs involve combining both native speakers of English interested in learning a second language, and language-minority students in the process of acquiring English, in the same classroom learning throughout the day taught in both languages”(Yoon Kyong Kim & Winsler pg. 241). TWI programs utilize both languages, in differing percentages based on the exact program, to teach children. TWI programs differ based on the percentage of dominant versus minority language instruction time. There is the 50-50 TWI program, where fifty percent of the class time the instruction is in the dominant language of the region [in the United States it would be English] and the other fifty percent of instruction time is in the language of the language-minority students. 50-50 TWI programs produce the most balanced bilinguals of the programs because the class time is divided equally between the two. However, the alumni of bilingual education programs experience the effects of multilingualism just like other bilinguals would.

**Effects of Bilingualism**

There are myriads of effects of bilingualism that could affect a child. However, there is no difference between the effects of multilingualism a child in a bilingual education program experiences versus the effects a simultaneous bilingual child would experience. Regardless, this paper will focus on studies that focus on bilingual education effects. Some effects this paper will explain include L1 morphic knowledge, parent perception of bilingual education, reading scores and L1 communication strategies in bilingual education. Skrypiczajko, an English Language Specialist from the University of Alberta, did a case study on students in English-Ukranian two-way immersion programs, he wanted to see if learning an L2 at such a young age affected the morphology of L1. He started by stating the positive and negative views on bilingual education from research standpoints. For a negative framework, some claimed that the language learning process is too demanding for a child to thrive in that environment. Not only that, but some researchers believe, “...that such programs ‘not only do not, but cannot produce graduates whose output is grammatical’”(Skrypiczajko pg. 10). These researchers believe that the brain cannot process the two forms of input at such a young age and still be learning everything they should be. The argument is that one ‘...pays for his L2 skills by a decrease in L1 skills…”(Skrypiczajko pg. 11). These researchers attribute insufficient proficiencies in their first language as a consequence of a bilingual perspective. If the price of learning a second language is lower proficiency in the first language, that could cause negative mental development for children. Without a strong proficiency in either language children are at risk of not developing a linguistic identity or language skills strong enough that they are able to portray their emotions. Without the skills available to them that would allow them to express themselves, it could cause problems in their future. On the other hand, Skrypiczajko discusses the positive effects and even said that “...bilingual students may have a greater capacity to analyze both syntactic and semantic aspects of sentences in language processing”(Skrypiczajko pg. 14). Bilingual children take in so much input that they must sift through and extract relevant information from. They do this in order to process the tone, language, and vocabulary necessary for providing accurate and relevant output for the interlocutor. The bilingual students were better at accurately understanding the structural ambiguities in sentences. However, the students’ language skills went far beyond understanding structural ambiguities.

Skrypiczajko found that “...teachers generally felt that the bilingual students had a high level of conscious awareness of the basics of Ukrainian morphology, do to a constant focused attention on grammatical elements during language instruction…”(Skrypiezajko pg. 6-7). Children in the English-Ukrainian TWI seemed to have a greater understanding of Ukrainian morphology. This is because of the repeated grammatical lessons in Ukranian since it is the L2 for most students. The repetition of Ukranian on such a frequent basis provided a solid base for Ukranian morphology. He also found that “...the bilingual subjects outperformed the monolinguals on all four tasks, and for nonsense words they also did so (by a wide margin) on the category naming task, while the monolinguals failed to outperform the bilinguals on any task”(Skrypiezajko pg. 48). The four tasks that bilingual subjects exceeded in were lexical decision processes, word-breaking, root writing, and category naming. They were able to distinguish made-up words from the real words, separate the root from the suffix, and reconstruct derived words and identify lexical categories. This proves that not only can children in bilingual education programs succeed but they can even surpass their peers in regular education.

Students falling behind on their education is a common misconception of bilingual education. From a negative perspective, researchers stated the children would fall behind because they cannot maintain the level of education as their regular education peers. The fear is that learning a second language would take the time that should be dedicated to reading level or other school subjects. “...[It] is important to note that the students in the dual-immersion class are not falling behind the students in the regular education class...while they are not doing significantly better, they are not doing significantly worse either, and may have the opportunity to become bilingual”(Ridley pg. 48-49). This study that was conducted took the results from standardized tests from the states of Iowa and Texas. The study showed bilingual education does not radically improve a child’s language skills, however, it does not set them behind their regular education counterparts. This is important because the misconception that children in bilingual education programs will not be able to succeed, and that they sacrifice their first language skills in order to be bilingual is false. This proves that bilingual education programs are a great option for children, it offers the opportunity for monolingual children of the dominant language to learn a second language and become highly proficient and bilingual. In addition, for monolingual children of minority languages, bilingual education provides them the opportunity to learn the dominant language in a supportive environment. The “sink-or-swim” approach that resulted from Proposition 203 in Arizona had these children fending for themselves in school. There was no support system behind them to ensure that they would succeed, but with bilingual education, they are learning in their first language while also learning the dominant language. This plays an important role when parents are considering whether to enroll their child in regular or bilingual education programs.

Choosing to put a child in bilingual education is a big decision for parents. A parent’s perspective on bilingual education is of the utmost importance. However, given the negative reputation that bilingual education programs receive, it is difficult to have parents choose to send their children there. That being said, parents who have sent their children to bilingual education programs see the benefits. Especially when children are starting their education, that is the time to consider bilingual education, in the preschool to elementary school years. At that point, the children being enrolled in school are not cognitively developed enough to make their own opinions or decision so the parent’s perspective is imperative. A study was done that surveyed the opinions of parents of children in a Chinese-English TWI preschool program that showed that the resoundingly had positive views of the education their child was receiving. The reasons that English-dominant parents sent their children to this program are, “...(a) Bilingual education would enhance the opportunity for children to be Chinese-English bilingual; (b) Chinese-language development would facilitate communication with the Chinese-speaking community; and (c) A high level of bilingualism could provide their children better career opportunities”(Lao pg. 107). English dominant parents want to provide better opportunities for their children in the future. They believe that it is one of the few courses of action that would enable their children to be bilingual. This emphasis on achieving bilingualism is different for Chinese-dominant parents. They chose to enroll their children in bilingual education because “...(a) high level of bilingualism could provide their children better career opportunities; (b) Chinese-language development would facilitate communication with the Chinese-speaking community; and (c) Chinese-English bilingual education would help children develop a positive self image”(Lao pg. 107). The Chinese-dominant parents care about their children becoming bilingual, but they know that since they live in an English dominant area that their children will become bilingual in order to interact with their surroundings. They choose TWI bilingual education because it provides the security of the Chinese language around them. Their first language is not being shamed, rather it is being demonstrated in a positive light. The native English speakers wanting to learn Chinese proves that their language is valuable. This helps build the foundation of positive mental health and self-image. In regular education, they are required to not use Chinese which could create a linguistic barrier between what they are learning and their identity. This especially comes into play when utilizing their L1 in a bilingual education setting.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programs are a form of bilingual education that differs from two-way immersion programs because CLIL programs utilize a subject centric form of education. Instead of teaching the language with the subjects, the subjects are taught and the language skills, syntax, semantics, etc. accompany. CLIL teaches the subjects in the language and helps motivate students through the acquisition of the language and its corresponding vocabulary. However, even in linguistic enriching environments, such as CLIL programs, code-switching and mixing will be present. They are natural processes in everyday multilingual life, as well as potential methods of instruction. Utilizing code-switching shows to children that it is a normal process and not something to be ashamed of, thus increasing the use of the language in everyday life. In these multilingual contexts, communication strategies are crucial. “...[The] L1 serves primarily to carry out the following language functions: switching between topics, changing from one language to another, affective functions and repetitive function. In addition, using the L1 has been considered a common technique for expressing emotions, including swearing”(Vázquez & Ramos Ordóñez pg. 37). In the context of bilingual education, the children are not only learning the language and how to use it, but they are learning the processes of normal bilinguals. Code-switching and language switching are important processes for bilingual and multilingual children to understand. It allows them to seamlessly transition between monolingual settings as well as be able to adequately express themselves as they grow up. Bilingual education sets children up to pursue new opportunities and have the self-confidence and skills they need in a multilingual world.

**Conclusion**

Bilingual education is a beneficial method of educating children. It enables children whose native language is the dominant language of the area to become bilingual and children whose native language is the minority language the opportunity to learn the dominant language in a supportive and positive environment. Most importantly students in bilingual programs do not fall behind on their education. They are at the same pace as their regular education peers. In addition, these students boost their morphic knowledge and gain communication strategies. Bilingual education gives students the awareness of the intricacies of language as well as the processes that they, as bilinguals, will need to go through in everyday life. These students are prepared for a variety of linguistic situations all in a supportive atmosphere at a young age.

**Importance**

In most of today’s globalized world, bilingualism and multilingualism are valued and seen as the norm. However, that is not the case in the United States. English is the official language and bilingual education is not widely supported across all fifty states. Regardless of how Americans view bilingual education, it has been proven around the world the benefits and advantages that it poses. Research on bilingual education enables people to educate themselves and aids in informing people about the value that bilingual education provides to children. For some children, it is their opportunity to become bilingual and introduce them to a global world at a young age. Bilingual education sets the students up for success by providing them with opportunities and opening doors for them that they would not have access to if not for their bilingualism.

Works Cited

Flores, Nelson & Beardsmore, Hugo Baetens. (2015). Programs and structures in bilingual and multilingual education. In Wayne E. Wright, Sovicheth Boun & Ofelia Garcia (Eds.), *The Handbook of Bilingual and Multilingual Education*, 205-222. Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons Inc.

Johnson, Eric J. (2011). (Re)Producing Linguistic Hierarchies in the United States: Language Ideologies of Function and Form in Public Schools. *International Journal of Linguistics* 3(1), 1-22.

Lao, C. (2004). Parents' Attitudes Toward Chinese–English Bilingual Education and Chinese-Language Use. *Bilingual Research Journal*, [online] 28(1), pp.99-121. Available at: <https://search-proquest-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/docview/222012950/fulltextPDF/C2A924C92EE4447CPQ/1?accountid=14214>.

Pavón Vázquez, V. and Ramos Ordóñez, M. (2018). Describing the use of the L1 in CLIL: an analysis of L1 communication strategies in classroom interaction. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, [online] 22(1), pp.35-48. Available at: https://www-tandfonline-com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/13670050.2018.1511681?needAccess=true.

Ridley, N. (2019). The effects of bilingual education on reading test scores: Can dual-immersion support literacy for all students?. *ProQuest*. [online] Available at: https://search.proquest.com/docview/305429615/2381F84AFBF74079PQ/4?accountid=14214.

Skrypiczajko, G. (1997). *The effect of bilingual education on L1 morphological knowledge - ProQuest*. [online] Search.proquest.com. Available at: https://search.proquest.com/docview/304387432?pq-origsite=summon.

Yoon Kyong Kim, Lindsey A. Hutchison & Adam Winsler. (2015). Bilingual education in the United States: an historical overview and examination of two-way immersion. *Educational Review* 67(2), 236-252.