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DEBUNKING URBAN LEGENDS ON BILINGUAL EDUCATION

by Sonia Soltero
The word bilingual means two languages, but when we use the word language we cannot neglect the fact that language embraces cultural, historical, and political dimensions. This means that when we analyze a specific language and its expressions we are strongly connected to its social meanings.

Moraes, 1996 p 8

For most societies, linguistic diversity is the norm, not the exception. Bilingualism is found throughout the world, in all countries, in all social classes, and across all age groups. For centuries, bilingual and multilingual societies have been created out of trade, migration, politics, and invasion. In the past decades, the advent of the information and communication age, increasing international travel, and growing migration, have augmented the bilingual population throughout the globe. A study recently conducted by the United Nations found that 66% of the world's children are now bilingual or multilingual, a remarkable increase over the last century (Goble, 2001). This boost in multilingualism is largely due to the fact that more people around the world are choosing to educate their children in a foreign language, specifically Arabic, Chinese, English, Russian, or Spanish (Baker, 2001).

Today, English is considered the world's lingua franca not only because it is thought of as a language of status, but also because it is the language most widely used for international commerce and the Internet. Unfortunately, this global thrust to acquire English has promoted monolingualism among English native speakers and has often resulted in negative attitudes toward acquiring other languages. In the US only 6.3% of the native born population speaks more than one language, a figure that according to Goble is far lower than in most other countries. The antagonistic outlook of the US pertaining to bilingualism is clearly reflected in the general apathy toward foreign language learning in schools and universities, the relentless efforts to eliminate bilingual education for language minority populations, and the obsessive push to impose official English language laws. Hostility toward bilingual education and support for restrictive language policies emerge from historical, political, and economic factors linked to power, prejudice, and ethnic intolerance. This xenophobic perspective was reawakened in the mid 1980s with the birth of the official English movement and a renewed and escalating opposition to bilingual education in the late 1990s. The growing numbers of immigrants from developing regions, such as Latin America, Asia, and Africa, created the foundation for anti-immigration sentiments that has led to a resurgence of language restrictionism in the US (Crawford, 2001).

The 2000 Census data show that the foreign-born population of the US reached 31 million (10% of the total population), a 57% increase over 1990. The Census also indicates an increase in US residents who speak a language other than English at home: 47 million, that is, 18% of people five years or older speak a language other than English at home, up from 14% in 1990. Of the US residents who reported speaking other languages at home, 60% speak Spanish, 21% speak another Indo-European language (such as Farsi, Urdu, Hindi, German, French, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, 15% speak Asian and Pacific Island languages, and 4% speak other languages. Almost 11 million of those who reported speaking a language other than English at home are school age children. Ethnic and linguistic minority enrollment in the US public schools has increased significantly, particularly those of Latino origin. The Latino population increased 58% from the 1990 Census count, from 22.4 million to 35.3 million. Data from the National Clearinghouse on Bilingual Education reveal that in the year 2000 there were over 5 million students classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) in the US, accounting for nearly 9% of all students (of the 11 million school age children who speak a language other than English at home, mentioned above, 6 million speak both English and the native language, and 5 million are LEP). Although these figures sound compelling for anti-immigrationists, foreign-born residents now constitute about 10% of our population, whereas by the 1920's 15% of the population in the US was foreign-born (Castro Feinberg, 2002).

Language restrictionism policies are closely tied to language minority education. The passage in 1998 of California's Proposition 227, English Language Education for Children in Public Schools Initiative, spearheaded by software entrepreneur Ron Unz made it law to disband bilingual education and institute compulsory one-year English immersion programs for English language learners. Similarly, Arizona passed Proposition 223 in 2000, which also eliminated bilingual education for linguistically diverse students, and voters in Massachusetts approved an initiative to discontinue bilingual education in 2002. Unfounded claims about the ineffectiveness of bilingual schooling and the media's predisposition against it, have allowed for the dissemination of inaccuracies and fabrications surrounding bilingual education. One of many such incorrect assertions came from Ron Unz in a 2000 CNN interview when he affirmed that it takes children "under one year" to learn English (a remarkable statement coming from someone who is neither a linguist or bilingual). Anyone who has tried to learn a new language is aware of the absurdity of this claim. It may take some individuals under one year to acquire very basic social communication skills, but it certainly takes much longer to acquire the more cognitively demanding academic language necessary to function and progress in school (Cummins, 2000). The prevalent notion that children can learn a second language in under a year has resulted in the establishment of one-year structured English immersion programs for language minority students in California, Arizona, Massachusetts, and other states. Questionable propositions, such as immersion programs, and unsupported arguments commonly used in opposition to bilingual schooling, become the platform on which many policy makers and educators successfully launch their anti-bilingual education rhetoric.

THE FALSE PROMISES OF ENGLISH IMMERSION

Imagine the Spanish speaking child's introduction to American education... he comes to school, not only without a word of English but without the environmental experience upon which school life is based. He cannot speak to the teacher and is unable to
understand what goes on about him in the classroom. He finally submits to rote learning, parroting words and processes in his own self-defense. To him, school life is artificial. He submits to it during class hours, only partially digesting the information, which the teacher has tried to impart. Of course, he learns English and the school subjects imperfectly! [emphasis added]

George I. Sanchez, 1940

Immigrants and other linguistic minorities realize that learning English is a necessity, not a luxury. For many parents and families of linguistic minority children, the only means to accomplish this task is through school. Understandably, many non-English speaking parents welcome the promise of a quick and easy path to English proficiency, academic attainment, and economic success for their children, such as the one embodied in Unz's one-year immersion programs. However, for most linguistic minority children, immersion programs fall short of their intended aim. While their English speaking peers are learning academic content and progressing in literacy acquisition, language minority children are submitted to intensive English language instruction and are deprived of learning academic content and literacy. By the time students exit the immersion program, they are even more academically behind than their English speaking peers.

Structured English immersion is designed for language minority students to learn the majority language and become monolingual and monoliterate in English. Language minority students are immersed in English and expected to learn it and the academic content at the same pace and level as their English native speaking peers, who do not have the added burden of learning a second language, the only mode of instruction. This compensatory program seeks to teach English to language minority students as quickly as possible. The inevitable outcome is the eradication of students' native language and culture since English instruction strips children of their linguistic and cultural capital, subjugating them to assimilation and loss of what otherwise are considered to be desirable assets: literate and oral proficiencies of a second language and intimate knowledge of another culture. Numerous studies (August & Hakuta, 1997; Thomas & Collier, 2002) have demonstrated that students who participate in programs that use the native language for instruction for more than three years show better academic performance, mastery in English, and have lower drop-out rates. Furthermore, there is no empirical evidence to support the time on task assumption of second language learning, the claim that the more children are exposed to English, the more English they will learn. Research shows that the quantity of contact with English is not as relevant as the quality of exposure to comprehensible input in English (Krashen, 1996). Students who are left to sink or swim in English-only classrooms, with little or no help in understanding the language of instruction and of textbooks, end up learning little English and little academic content. Students who are in classrooms where the native language is used for instruction to make the academic content meaningful as they receive specialized language instruction to acquire English are better served linguistically, culturally, socially, and academically.

THE RESISTANCE FALLACY

Tragically, many immigrants these days refuse to learn English! They never become productive members of American society. They remain stuck in a linguistic and economic ghetto, many living off welfare and costing Americans millions of tax dollars each year.

US English, as quoted in Crawford, 1992, p. xi

Another prevalent belief in the US is that immigrants resist learning English and that they cling to their native language and culture at the expense of assimilating into the mainstream society. The reality is that the pull toward the "language of status" (English) and the propensity for native language loss is accelerating among immigrant families. The current trend among immigrants is to shift to the majority language by the second generation, a phenomenon that previously took three generations. In 2000, only 8% of US residents reported speaking English less than very well and less than 1% reported speaking no English at all. According to Crawford (2001), after 15 years in this country about three in four Latino immigrants speak English on a daily basis, while 70% of their children become dominant or monolingual in English. By contrast, for earlier immigrants it was their grandchildren, not their children, who became fully dominant in English. On the issue of language ghettos, Tse (2001) points to a recent survey of immigrants in the US from four Spanish speaking populations concentrated in major cities (Colombian, Dominicans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans) which reported that on average about 70% of respondents said they understood English well or very well.

Those who maintain that linguistic minorities refuse to learn English often overlook critical factors that can slow down the acquisition of English for certain groups. Income and education have a significant impact on the rate and level of competence in the acquisition of English. The more schooling that students have in the native country the more they will have the necessary background knowledge and skills to facilitate transfer into English academic learning. Similarly, higher levels of income afford families more educational resources, more access to English speakers, and better knowledge of navigating the legal, social, and cultural dynamics of society. Access to adult language classes is also a major problem for those seeking to acquire proficiency in English. Across the US, the demand for adult ESL classes is increasing as their funding and availability decrease. In addition to the shortage of ESL instruction, other obstacles to learning English reflect the inequities of poverty. Because community and state sponsored ESL classes are often full and have long waiting lists, the only other option left are programs that are too costly for low income families. In addition, low-wage working immigrants who have two or three jobs, have little if any spare time to take English classes and engage in formal language studies. This is particularly difficult for migrant workers and their families, who are constantly on the move and cannot devote uninterrupted periods of time to a language program.

THE GRANDFATHER ARGUMENT

The argument most frequently heard against bilingual education goes something like this: "My grandfather came to this country and did very well without bilingual education or any other special treatment." This statement appears accurate and satisfactory until it is scrutinized more
closely. The counterargument to this position is twofold; first, the extent to which past immigrants “succeeded” depended heavily on their educational, economic, migratory, and political conditions before migrating, as well as the levels of English proficiency necessary for employment in this country; and second, the mistaken notion that past immigrants did not participate in bilingual education.

Until recently, not all children went to school, regardless of the language of instruction. During the last great wave of immigration to the US, between 1880 and 1915, very few succeeded in school, native or foreign born. Half of all Americans ages 14-17 either did not reach high school or dropped out before graduating. Rothstein (1998) presents data on the federal immigration commission of 1911, that positions Southern Italian immigrants as having the most inadequate school record: 58% of Southern Italian children in the 7th grade stayed in school another year, while 80% of native born white children, 62% of Polish children, and 74% of Russian Jewish children did so. More notable, in New York 54% of native-born children went on to high school while only 34% of foreign-born did so. In 1931, only 11% of Italians graduated from high school compared to 40% graduation rate for all students.

As Rothstein (1998) points out, recent immigrants are not the first to seek bilingual education for their children. In the 19th and early 20th century, European immigrants fought for and won the right to educate their children in two languages in public school. In New York, the first bilingual school was established in 1837 to provide German-speaking children instruction in the native language as they acquired English. In 1866 the Chicago Board of Education established German language schools to address the educational and linguistic needs of German-speaking children, who accounted for one-fourth of the city’s enrollment. In San Francisco Chinese language schools were established in 1885. From 1880 to 1930, Polish immigrants in New York had a preference for bilingual instruction as a way of preserving their cultural traditions through parochial schools. Interestingly, researchers found that the bilingual instruction the Polish children received helped them progress more rapidly than Polish and Italian children who attended monolingual public schools. However, as is the case today, linguistic minorities were divided on whether it is best to be bicultural and bilingual or to become entirely assimilated to the majority language and culture.

THE HOME-LEARNING MYTH

Language minority parents feel increasing pressure to assimilate their families into the dominant language and culture, believing this to be the only way for their children to succeed in the US. Understandably, parents want to protect their children from the prejudice and discrimination of speaking imperfect or accented English, which the parents themselves have endured. It is not surprising then that for some parents, English-only instruction is an appealing and promising alternative to native language instruction. Often, these same parents go even further by making the painful decision to only speak English at home, even when they are not proficient in the language and in spite of experiencing severe communication breakdowns with their children (Tse, 2001). To add to the anguish, language minority families realize that the rejection of the home language and culture carries a high price: an intergenerational language gap, alienation from the native community, rupture from cultural norms and customs, loss of identity, and social isolation.

For linguistically diverse families who refuse bilingual schooling for their children, a way to preserve the mother tongue is to believe that they will do so in the home. This is easier said than done. On one hand, the influence of English speaking peers and media causes children to more readily shift to the dominant language by resisting to use the native language. Children’s resistance coupled with parents’ insistence in using the mother tongue often results in confrontational and distressing home situations, eventually leading the parents to give up on trying to maintain the native language at home. On the other hand, the type of skilled and literate language proficiency required for future professional contexts, such as command of a wide range of syntactic structures, extensive vocabulary, and sophisticated written forms, are achieved only through formal schooling. Even highly educated professionals find it problematic to take on the responsibility to educate their children at home in the native language, a task that becomes much more difficult for parents who have limited education and/or have multiple jobs.

The social stigma associated with minority languages, the notion that bilingualism is a hindrance, and the fears of linguicism (prejudice based on language or dialect), all contribute to parents’ misguided beliefs about bilingual education. When parents understand the fundamental benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy, the pedagogical constructs of effective bilingual schooling, and the underlying discriminatory agendas behind the eradication of bilingual education, then they can make true informed decisions about language choices and rights.

LEAVING THE URBAN LEGENDS BEHIND

Hostility toward bilingualism has little to do with language, but much to do with antagonism toward the culture and values of those who speak the other language. The belief that bilingualism is good for some but not for others is widespread in the US. For many, the difference resides in whether someone is bilingual by background or circumstance (a folk or circumstantial bilingual) rather than by formal study (an elite or elective bilingual). Learning a foreign language at school has prestige even if full proficiency is seldom reached; acquiring the same language naturally in a minority community that is supported through schooling is seen as a burden on society and a malady to be remedied. Native language instruction goes beyond the development of language proficiency and cognitive growth. That is, the use of the native language in the curriculum catapults minority students from their subjugated positions by sharing the power with the dominant group. Thus, the sociopolitical and sociolinguistic ramifications that arise from bilingual education provide the medium to brake from established social inequality constructs. Macedo (1997, p. 276) concurs:

...educators must demystify the standard dominant language and the old assumption about its inherent superiority. Educators must develop liberatory and critical bilingual programs informed by a radical
pedagogy so that the minority language will cease to provide its speakers with the experience of subordination...

Urban legends are said to be captivating, titillating, and disturbing stories that have a wide audience, are circulated spontaneously, and which many have chosen to believe despite the lack of actual evidence to corroborate the stories. Challenging unsupported claims about bilingualism, language minorities, and bilingual education becomes urgent in a time of global instability and anxiety. Discrediting bilingual education and minority bilingualism has once again turned into a vehicle for anti-immigration and discriminatory practices against language minority groups. To reverse this pattern of prejudice, it is imperative that popular but unfounded believes that target certain minority groups be confronted with empirical research, accurate historical documentation, and evidence of bilingual education success.

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REFERENCES


