THE ONGOING DEBATE OVER BILINGUAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS – ARE THEY EFFECTIVE?

By

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In this modern day and age of great advancement in technology, there is still an inconsistency in defining and implementing the purpose of reading and writing for bilingual children. This inconsistency results in an ongoing debate across many levels and within areas of society -- political, parental, school boards and classroom teachers. Some think that for an immigrant bilingual and literacy should be about enculturation and assimilation into a new language and culture. On the other hand the native minority bilingual literacy goal is reading and writing fluency in two or more languages and for some ‘prestigious bilingual ’ biliteracy is seen as something that will promote critical thinking, balanced and detached awareness, empathy and sensitivity to other cultures (Baker, 2006, p.320). These ideas of bilingual education have resulted in the implementing of laws, acts, titles and programs. For both past and present, the programs in use are influenced by the view of those enforcing it.

During the late 1960 we had a high rate of Hispanics migrating to the US from Mexico and Puerto Rico. This prompted the funding for educational programs that allowed the student to learn in their L1 while acquiring English. Around this time Cuban immigrants were entering Miami and this influenced the introduction of a two-way dual language program in the Coral Way School. In 1968, Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) also known as the Bilingual Education Act provided schools with funding for bilingual programs. These funds also allotted for the training of bilingual educators (Garcia, 2007, p.2). In view of the programs and money given to Bilingual Education, we can say that the government was on
the right track. There was a need for bilingual education and something was done in an attempt to meet the need. Unfortunately this vision of bilingual education was blurred. In 1974 the Bilingual Education Act created what was known as a transitional bilingual education. This program entitled a student three years of school in a semi bilingual setting. The majority of teaching was done in English with some Spanish. At the end of the third year the students were placed in a mainstream setting. In the 1990s’ the press against bilingual education became stronger. Many Americans complained about the funds used to teach in a language other than the national language. There was a push for immigrants to drop their native language and adapt the English language (Garcia, 2007, p.2). Today, bilingual education is still in a struggle. There is a political push to restrict Bilingual Education. Some states, such as California, Massachusetts and Arizona, have affirmed Bilingual Education illegal. In 2002, Title VII of the ESEA act removed the Bilingual Education Act and replaced it with the ‘No Child Left Behind Act’ (NCLB) and then added ‘Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students’ (Garcia, 2007, p.3).

Why have so many programs been implemented into our schools? It seems as if a program just gets going and then within a few years we are trying something different. I marvel at the idea that this “great America” is still puzzled and unsure how to best serve our immigrants on an educational level. Are we trying to fail our ELLs/Bilinguals? Our goal as an educational system is to produce students that are well developed in literacy.

What is literacy? Why has developing bilinguals’ literacy skills in English (L2) while letting them maintain their L1 been constantly debated or attacked? Literacy is regarded as a
key to economic self advancement, and personal empowerment. It is viewed as a ticket of entry into our society, the currency by which social and economic positions are waged (as cited by Baker, 2006, p.321). Literacy is a powerful tool. Obtaining this tool and ensuring that students of this country also reach a high level of literacy capability should be an educational priority. Our country will be strengthened as we educate our students and equip them to take a place in society. Ironically, only a small percentage of U.S. Students finish school with a high literacy rate. The majority finish with a “just enough to get by” literacy capability. Unfortunately, this results in low paying employment (as cited by Baker, 2006, p.321).

In the book entitled ‘Research-Based Strategies for English Language Learners’ the author writes about her pre-service experience in a classroom where the students didn’t speak English. Her initial reaction was as follows: “They don’t speak any English. They don’t understand what is being said and seem totally lost. There is no special instruction for them. I saw one student just put his head down on the desk and cry. The teacher just ignored him. Is this the right thing to do?” (Rea, 2006, p.11). It was this defining moment that inspired Debbie Rea along with Sandra Mercuri to write a book that would combine theory with practice.

Sandra Mercuri in comparison to Debbie Rea was an immigrant student. Sandra was fortunate enough to come to the U.S with a proficient L1 and some knowledge of the English language. She did not have the same struggles that many of our children are experiencing today, yet she had challenges that have helped her understand second language learners. She recalls taking courses and standardized test in a language, cultural context in which she had difficulty relating to the content. It was during her internship that she realized how ineffective
traditional teaching was for newcomers. The teachers were not reaching some of their students. The students were sitting in isolated seats, completing worksheets and answering textbook questions. The students that had arrived with adequate schooling in their first language would academically catch up, but those students that had a weak education in their L1 would show excessive struggle throughout their school years. There was also a group she encountered called the “most forgotten subgroup.” These students have been in the U.S. for at least seven years. They had been able acquire the English language for speaking purposes but were struggling in all areas of literacy (Rea, 2006, p.9).

During my own internship, I have encountered the traditional way of teaching, the forgotten subgroup and those who acquire their L2 efficiently and quickly due to a high literacy in their L1. My students are in eighth grade and come from various Hispanic countries. They have been in this country over seven years. I sit and observe their struggles in reading and writing. Some show little motivation for learning. The other day I looked through their test folders. Most of them had failed almost every test. An exception was Fatamata who came to the U.S. from Africa about two years ago. She has “picked up” English quickly. Her reading, writing, and comprehension skills exceed the rest of the class. I think it is because she has a high literacy level in her L1 and was able to transfer it to her L2. When I looked at her test folder, her grades were eighty and above. It’s 2010 and I have encountered similar experiences that Sandra Mercuri had in 2005. Many times during my internship I felt that if someone does not intervene in the ELL’s education, they are not going to make it in High School.
Recently I read an article about a successful bilingual educational model implemented in a NYC Public High School. This was an interesting article about a school that implemented a Speech Community Model that rested on seven factors:

1. the absence of native English speaking students; (this encouraged a willingness to experiment with a limited English)
2. Spanish-speaking role models (Latino teachers);
3. Status of Spanish and English more equalized (bilingualism a goal held by all for all);
4. Specific goals for English acquisition (targeted English language instruction to meet needs of Latino high school adolescents);
5. Bilingualism as a teaching strategy (translating from the English of textbooks to the Spanish of the classroom to grasp academic material);
6. Spanish to educate rigorously (Spanish is used as the sole instrument to raise educational standards); and
7. Spanish to connect deeply (Spanish is the thread that connects all educational experiences, as well as student-teacher relationships) (Garcia, 2007, p.9).

This model of teaching bilinguals has proved to be highly successful. It has a 91 percent attendance rate, an 80 percent on-time graduation rate and over 70 percent of the students have passed the Math and English Regents. The Gregorio Luperón High School was started because Luperón saw an educational need for the Latino population within the community. He fashioned his program similar to early Bilingual Education programs (like the ones stated above) and the students achieved high literacy (Garcia, 2007, p.8).
The debate over what works for bilingual education will likely continue. However, as educators we must seek to meet the needs of our ELL students. This may require a “moving away” from traditional methods and adopting programs similar to the successful Speech Community Model implemented at Luperón High School.
References

