

# **Bilingual Education in the United States: Historical Development and Current Issues<sup>1</sup>**

Carlos J. Ovando  
Arizona State University

## **Abstract**

Bilingual education in the United States has been contested and reformulated within varying historical, political, social, and economic contexts. Guided by three interrelated research questions on ideology, policy, and politics, this article examines the various interpretations of the historical forces that have determined language policy in the United States by first briefly discussing the permissive, restrictive, opportunist, and dismissive periods and then focusing on the current challenges to bilingual education. The author argues that changing political, social, and economic forces, rather than any consistent ideology, have shaped the nation's responses to language diversity. He concludes that language ideology in the United States has shifted according to changing historical events, and the absence of a consistent U.S. language ideology has enhanced the role of symbolic politics—the resentment of special treatment for minority groups.

## **Introduction**

Long before European colonizers arrived on the North American continent with their own languages, cultures, myths, and ideologies, the land was a cornucopia of indigenous languages and cultures. An estimated 250 to 1,000 American Indian languages were spoken in 15th-century North America at the time of European contact (Sherzer, 1992; Grosjean, 1982). If we also consider Mexico and Central and South America, the linguistic reality of 1492 America becomes even more diverse and complex. Contrary to the popular image of the United States as a monolingual culture dominated by the English language and White Anglo-Saxon traditions, numerous indigenous people's dreams and realities have long been filtered through a polyglot prism (Crawford, 1998; Macías, 1999; Wiley, 2000).

Despite this rich cultural and linguistic seedbed, the U.S. founders envisioned “a country with a unified history, with unified traditions, and with a common language” (Hechinger, 1978, p. 130). This vision was based largely on the English legal system and schooling practices (Tocqueville, 1873; Tyack, 1981). Given this Anglo-Saxon orientation at the dawn of the nation’s history, the colonizers set the stage for the role of symbolic politics of language and ethnic identity in the United States (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003; Ovando & McLaren, 2000). The potential for controversy over language policy was present from the beginning. Yet, the nation’s founders adopted neither “an official language nor a government-sanctioned body to regulate speech” (Crawford, 1999, p. 22).

However, issues of language inclusion or exclusion often masked ignorance, indifference, or collective psychological repression. European languages were more likely than others to be treated with respect, and their speakers to be accommodated in schooling and government services (Wiley, 1998). Indigenous languages, represented by American Indians, Mexicans, Hawaiians, and Puerto Ricans, did not fare as well. Despite the alleged U.S. libertarian linguistic tradition (Baron, 1990; Heath, 1976, 1983; Kloss, 1977/1998; Ricento, 1998), assimilationist and pluralist policies (cf. Wiebe, 1967) have each prevailed, often as surrogates for racist, classist, and religious prejudices.

In this article, I examine three interrelated research questions on language ideology, policy, and politics:

1. Is there an explicit “tradition” of any kind, regarding language diversity in the United States?
2. What have been the key factors in determining U.S. policies for educating language minorities, and how have these varied during different historical periods?
3. What strategies have been used—and how have opponents responded—in the struggle to establish effective educational programs for language-minority children?

In answering these questions, I briefly discuss the permissive, restrictive, opportunist, and dismissive periods as identified by Baker and Jones (1998) and cross-reference the work of Heath (1976), Kloss (1977/1998), Baron (1990), and Ricento (1998) to argue that changing localized political, social, and economic forces, rather than any consistent ideology, have shaped the nation’s responses to language diversity. I will argue that language ideology in the United States, rather than maintaining a stable course, has shifted according to changing historical events (Crawford, 1992, 2000; Wiley, 2000, 2002). In contrast to the situation in numerous other countries, where language has been a salient unifier and divider, the absence of a consistent language ideology in the United States has enhanced the role of symbolic politics of language, creating resentment of special treatment for minority groups. This,

in turn, has tended to overwhelm pedagogical considerations in making policy for language-minority education (Crawford, 2000; Ovando & McLaren, 2000; Ovando & Wiley, 2003).

### **The Problem with Theories**

Scholars have different interpretations of historical events and legislation regarding development of language policies. For example, Heath (1976) argues for an explicit libertarian tradition in the nation's formative period based on her interpretations of historical events. Kloss (1977/1998) emphasizes that policies have been relatively tolerant for immigrants speaking European immigrant languages such as German and gives short shrift to the Americanization period, when German was singled out for repression; Kloss also neglects the treatment of conquered and colonized groups and non-White immigrants (Crawford, 1992; Wiley, 2002, 1998). On the other hand, Baron (1990) offers a mirror image of Kloss—a history in which the restrictionist impulse has always been with us and has usually predominated: “The conditions producing today’s official English movement have been present in the United States since before the country’s founding two centuries ago, and the arguments both for and against official English have been repeated, with slight variations and little concrete effect, since that time. In short, little has changed in the past two hundred years, at least so far as official English is concerned” (p. xiii). On the other hand, Ricento (1998) offers a restrictionist interpretation—a “deep values” theory of history, in which poor language minorities always got the short end of the stick because of a set of dominant “beliefs and attitudes” that promoted assimilation over pluralism.

Though these theories contribute to an understanding of language policies from a historical perspective, they all take a tendentious approach to history that attempts to prove broad generalizations (i.e., “theories”) about how Americans have responded to language diversity by isolating consistent “traditions,” “values,” or ideologies that have determined official and unofficial policies. History, being full of contradictions, provides plenty of evidence to support virtually any of these propositions. By taking language policy decisions out of their broader context and by making sweeping conclusions about historical events, one can make many political and academic arguments, but I do not think that any of them are very defensible.

While it is true that the 18th and 19th centuries in U.S. history were a period of general linguistic tolerance, it would be inaccurate to conclude that an a priori “American view” of bilingualism existed at this time on the basis of which decisions were made. The 18th and 19th centuries can be more accurately characterized as inconsistent and contradictory regarding the ideology, policies, and politics of language diversity. Though some states published official documents in minority languages, the U.S. Congress consistently

refused to do so. Some states authorized bilingual education, while others mandated English-only instruction. The 18th- and 19th-century responses to language diversity were shaped by changing localized political, social, and economic forces rather than by any systematic ideas about language itself.

### **The Permissive Period: 1700s–1880s**

Records suggest that from the 1700s to the 1880s, a fair amount of tolerance or benign neglect existed toward the many languages represented in the new society, especially those of northern Europe (Fishman, in Hakuta, 1986; Wiley, 1998). As various groups established homesteads in U.S. territory, a general sense of geographical and psychological openness existed (Turner, 1894/1989). If individuals did not like their neighbors, they could keep clearing the land and move. Because of the strong sense of identity derived from a person's ancestral language, many new immigrant communities tenaciously hung onto their maternal languages for religious services, community newspapers, and private and public schools (Kloss, 1977/1998).

During the 19th century, large numbers of immigrant communities formed enclaves and aggressively promoted their language, religion, and cultural loyalties—what Havighurst (1978) calls Defensive Pluralism. They believed that it was feasible to maintain their ancestral ways of life while concurrently participating in the civil life of the nation. A number of states passed laws that authorized bilingual education. During the second half of the 19th century, bilingual or non-English-language instruction was provided in some form in many public and private schools: German in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, and Oregon; Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish in Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Washington; Dutch in Michigan; Polish and Italian in Wisconsin; Czech in Texas; French in Louisiana; and Spanish in the Southwest (Kloss, 1977/1998). In 1900, approximately 600,000 children, about 4% of the elementary school population, were receiving all or part of their instruction in German (Kloss, 1977/1998). Likewise, at the turn of the century in New Mexico, either Spanish or English or both could be the language of a school's curriculum (Leibowitz, 1971). Although this period can be characterized as permissive, it is important to keep in mind that 19th-century education was not set up to actively promote bilingualism. Rather, a policy of linguistic assimilation without coercion seemed to prevail.

### **The Restrictive Period: 1880s–1960s**

The 1880s were a turning point in the historical development of linguistic and immigration restrictionism. In the 1880s, a number of repressive policies appeared, but for very different reasons. Repressive Indian language policy was part of a cultural genocide campaign designed to “civilize” Indians and

contain them on reservations—part of a military strategy. Anti-German sentiment, however, that flourished during this time period largely stemmed from anti-Catholic agitation.

During this period, missionary leaders interested in schooling Indian students via mother-tongue education unsuccessfully contested the assimilationist English-only policies for Indian boarding schools advocated by the Federal Indian Office. During this period, the American Protective Association promoted English-only school laws, which Illinois and Wisconsin adopted in 1889. The 1890s witnessed the founding of the Immigration Restriction League as well as early agitation for a literacy test that would require any immigrant wishing to settle in the United States to have the ability to read 40 words in any language (Higham, 1988).

Furthermore, European nationalism began to exert its influence during this period. Increasing fear about the importation of foreign ideologies into the United States resulted in a call for all immigrants to be assimilated into one cultural and linguistic mold. For example, the Naturalization Act of 1906 stipulated that to become naturalized U.S. citizens, immigrants must be able to speak English. The new immigrants arriving in largest numbers during that time came from southern, eastern, and central Europe. Concerned about linguistic, cultural, and ideological competition, the descendants of established settlers clamored for the power to control institutions such as schools.

The United States' move away from a *laissez-faire* attitude regarding multiple languages and cultures continued into the 20th century. When the country declared war on Germany during World War I, the resulting anti-German hostility caused the United States to push for monolingualism, and the teaching of German as a foreign language was eliminated in most school districts because pro-melting pot ideologues portrayed it as un-American. From 1918 to 1920, the Bureau of Naturalization and the Bureau of Education of the United States sponsored bills that “provided for substantial federal aid to states, on a dollar-matching basis, to finance the teaching of English to aliens and native illiterates” (Higham, 1992, p. 82). By 1923, the legislatures of 34 states had dictated English-only instruction in all private and public primary schools (Kloss, 1977/1998).

This push for homogeneity became a well-established pattern within schools during the first half of the 20th century. It was spurred by many factors, including the standardization and bureaucratization of urban schools (Tyack, 1974), the need for national unity during the two world wars, and the desire to centralize and solidify national gains around unified goals for the country (González, 1975). During this period, many large urban schools created Americanization classes to prepare immigrants for integration into mainstream society. These classes often had an ethnocentric stance, presenting U.S. cultural patterns as being more desirable than the immigrants' ancestral cultures and languages (Higham, 1988). Apart from these classes, the predominant approach to educating language-minority students in the United States during

this period was the sink-or-swim method, also known as submersion. Most educators and policy makers felt that it was up to the language-minority students, not the schools, to make the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive adjustments necessary to achieve assimilation into American society. When many of these students did not prosper academically, their home cultures and languages were frequently singled out as the culprit. Blaming language-minority students for their academic failure became fashionable among social scientists. Hence, school administrators and teachers generally did not assume responsibility for developing culturally and linguistically compatible classroom practices.<sup>2</sup>

Although the restrictive period emphasized monolingual English instruction in public schools (Baker & Jones, 1998), the debate over the role of non-English mother-tongue instruction continued. For example, in *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923),<sup>3</sup> the Supreme Court declared Nebraska's prohibition against teaching foreign languages in elementary schools to be unconstitutional on the basis of the 14th Amendment. Although Kloss (1977/1998) saw this decision as a Magna Carta for private nationality schools because it enabled "all immigrant groups to cultivate their languages as a subject matter in private elementary schools," this case actually had little or no effect in arresting the demise of bilingual instruction during the first half of the 20th century (p. 73).

During this period, we see that bilingual education served what Crawford calls "instrumental and symbolic politics," or efforts to promote practical objectives and ideological principles. Were proponents pushing a policy to teach immigrant children English as effectively as possible? Or to insist that immigrants show proper deference to the language of their adopted country? Distinguishing between instrumental and symbolic politics can be problematic. Throughout U.S. history, proposals to provide bilingual accommodations have prompted a seemingly practical objection: If we do it for one group, we will have to do it for all.

It is particularly difficult to distinguish between symbolic and instrumental appeals in the case of language policies toward conquered groups (e.g., American Indians and Puerto Ricans). Many times, language policies have been dressed up in glowing terms about the superiority of American "civilization" and democratic institutions, yet the intent of English-only mandates was to promote the practical objective of destroying minority cultures and to maintain colonial domination. As the U.S.-appointed commissioner of education for Puerto Rico explained, "Colonization carried forward by the armies of war is vastly more costly than that carried forward by the armies of peace, whose outposts and garrisons are the public schools of the advancing nation" (Crawford, 1992, p. 50).

## The Opportunist Period: 1960s–1980s

World War II served as the first wake-up call regarding the United States' inadequacies in foreign-language instruction. Because language, math, and science skills were essential for military, commercial, and diplomatic endeavors, these subjects became a high priority in the national defense agenda during the cold war period. On October 4, 1957, the former Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*. This small, shiny object beeping its way through the Earth's atmosphere shook federal policies in foreign languages, mathematics, and science and led to the creation of the National Defense Education Act in 1958. One of the act's primary goals was to raise the level of foreign-language education in the United States. To accomplish this mission, generous fellowships were awarded to promising foreign-language teachers.

Although the National Defense Education Act promoted much-needed improvement in the teaching of foreign languages, it did not alter the linguistically disjointed tradition of the United States. On the one hand, the country was encouraging the study of foreign languages for English monolinguals, at great cost and with great inefficiency. At the same time, it was destroying through monolingual English instruction the linguistic gifts that children from non-English-language backgrounds bring to our schools.

This failure to nurture linguistic diversity began to change slowly in the 1960s as a result of the civil rights movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which in turn led to the creation of the Office for Civil Rights. The rebirth of instruction in languages other than English also resulted from changes in immigration laws. For example, the 1965 Immigration Act revoked the Naturalization Act of 1906 and terminated the 1924 national origin quota system. As a result of the 1965 Immigration Act, larger numbers of Asians and Latin Americans started to enter the country (Molesky, 1988). With this demographic shift, more language-minority students from these regions of the world appeared in U.S. classrooms, where bilingual instruction was needed.

The rebirth of bilingual education also owes a great debt to Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution of 1959. Exiled Cubans who arrived in Florida envisioned that their sojourn in the United States would be short-lived. Thus, they wanted their children to retain their language and culture in preparation for their return home. To educate their children in English while maintaining the Spanish language, the Cuban community in 1963 established a highly successful two-way bilingual education program at Coral Way Elementary School in Dade County, Florida. The success of this experiment has been attributed to the supportive role of professional Cuban parents, the availability of well-trained Cuban teachers in the area, federal assistance through the Cuban Refugee Act, and a low level of racism toward these predominantly light-skinned Cubans. Coral Way's success with bilingual education stimulated other bilingual immersion programs in Florida and other parts of the country (González, 1975; Ovando & Collier, 1998). Most of these were locally developed and funded Spanish-English programs, but other languages also began to appear.

To aid and monitor the education of English language learners through mother-tongue and English education, the federal government enacted the Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) in 1968. As an offshoot of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, the act strove to help disenfranchised language-minority students, especially Hispanics. Unfortunately, the act's aims were somewhat ambiguous. As Crawford (2000a) writes, "Enacted at the apex of the Great Society, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 passed Congress without a single voice raised in dissent. Americans have spent the past 30 years debating what it was meant to accomplish" (p. 107). In its early stages, the act did not provide a clear position for either strong or weak versions of bilingual education. Originally, for example, school districts could receive federal funds under the Bilingual Education Act without using languages other than English. Such funds were to be used "to support educational programs, to train teachers and aides, to develop and disseminate instructional materials, and to encourage parental involvement" (Crawford, 1999, p. 40).

However, despite the ambiguous nature of the law, the Bilingual Education Act marked a significant first step in moving away from the Darwinian sink-or-swim educational practices so prevalent from the 1880s through the 1960s. Language-minority students' ancestral languages and cultures were recognized in some form in the contents and processes of school life. Although controversial, bilingual education became a household term in U.S. educational circles, as school districts that received federal funds were obligated to show compliance with the law to address the needs of English language learners. The act also began to undermine the English-only instruction laws that were still on the books in many states.

For the first time in American educational history, the federal government embarked on an educational experiment that sought to build upon students' home cultures, languages, and prior experiences in such a way that they could start learning without first being proficient in English. As a result of the Bilingual Education Act, community activism, and litigation by Spanish-speaking parents in the Southwest, many elementary and some secondary bilingual and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs were implemented throughout the United States. These programs sought to address the academic, linguistic, sociocultural, and emotional needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Guided initially more by goodwill and intuition than by specific pedagogical principles based on empirical research, the Bilingual Education Act set in motion a movement that has come very far since its inception. However, some critics of the act, such as Noel Epstein (1977), characterized the new experiment as a "death wish" on the part of the nation, for he saw bilingual education as an instrument for maintaining ethnolinguistic enclaves that someday would threaten the unity of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The next important event in the rebirth of bilingual education was the 1974 Supreme Court case *Lau v. Nichols* (414 U.S. 5637). In retrospect, the *Lau* decision can be seen as the most important and enduring legal symbol through which the civil rights of language-minority students will continue to be deliberated in the years to come (Baker & Jones, 1998; Hakuta, 1986; Lyons, 1990; Ovando & Collier, 1998). The *Lau* decision was the result of a class action suit representing 1,800 Chinese students who alleged discrimination on the grounds that they could not achieve academically because they did not understand the instruction of their English-speaking teachers. *Lau v. Nichols* has had a profound effect on programs serving language-minority student populations. Basing their unanimous decision on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the justices concluded that equal treatment of English-speaking and non-English-speaking students did not constitute equal educational opportunity and, therefore, violated non-English-speaking students' civil rights (Ovando, 1977). Speaking for the court, Chief Justice Douglas stated:

There is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education. . . . We know that those who do not understand English are certain to find their classroom experiences wholly incomprehensible and in no way meaningful. (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974)

For many educators and parents already sympathetic to the philosophy of bilingual education, the spirit of this court decision appeared to be a strong force in their favor. Those not committed to mother-tongue education, however, saw the legal implications of *Lau v. Nichols* as indistinct. Because *Lau* did not prescribe specific curricular content or methodology to restore the civil rights of the students in question, it was possible that a broad range of programs with diverse philosophical underpinnings, from "assimilation as quickly as possible" to "separatism without discrimination" (desegregation notwithstanding), could satisfy the spirit of the law.

Nevertheless, the *Lau* decision has had an enormous impact on the development of bilingual education in the United States. Reflecting on the magnitude of this court decision, Teitelbaum and Hiller (1977) state that "the *Lau* decision legitimized and gave impetus to the movement for equal educational opportunity for students who do not speak English" by raising "the nation's consciousness of the need for bilingual education," encouraging federal legislation, and energizing federal enforcement efforts (p. 139). The *Lau* verdict abolished the sink-or-swim practices of the past and led to the passage of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act in August 1974. With this act, Congress affirmed the *Lau* decision and expanded its jurisdiction "to apply to all public school districts, not just those receiving federal financial assistance." The act stipulates that:

No state shall deny equal educational opportunity to an individual on account of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, by . . . the failure of an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs. (20 U.S.C. § 1703, in Lyons, 1992, p. 10)

More pressure on school districts to implement some kind of meaningful instruction for English language learners (ELL) came from the Office for Civil Rights, which issued the 1975 *Lau* Remedies. Representing a new level of federal requirements for addressing the needs of language-minority students, the *Lau* Remedies served as a blueprint for school districts to follow in identifying language-minority students and determining their English-language proficiency. The *Lau* Remedies specified suitable pedagogical strategies, the importance of moving ELLs into mainstream classrooms in a timely fashion, and professional standards for bilingual teachers. According to the *Lau* Remedies, bilingual education should be implemented in all school districts with at least 20 ELLs who represented the same language. While such students were accessing academic content through their home language, teachers were to instruct them in ESL so that they could eventually reach a level of English competency that would enable them to compete at grade level with their peers in monolingual English classrooms. The *Lau* Remedies redirected school districts to provide strong versions of bilingual education for language-minority students to enable them to become bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural. School districts were now required to provide evidence that they had effective programs to meet the academic, linguistic, and sociocultural needs of language-minority students. If school districts were not in compliance with the guidelines, they could end up forfeiting federal funds (Ovando & Collier, 1998; Teitelbaum & Hiller, 1977).

*Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981) is generally considered the second most important court decision influencing education in the English language (Lyons, 1992). It gave the public more specific guidelines by which to determine whether a particular school district was meeting the spirit of *Lau*. In this case, the school district in Raymondville, Texas, was charged with violating the civil rights of ELLs under the Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1974. In response to this case, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals established a three-step test for determining whether school districts were taking “appropriate action” as required by the act for assessing programs serving language-minority students: (a) The school program must be anchored in sound educational theory, (b) adequate resources and personnel must be evident in the school program, and (c) the school program must reflect sound practices and results, not only in language but also in such content areas as math, science, social studies, and language arts (Crawford, 1999; Ovando & Collier, 1998). So important are these criteria that the “*Castañeda* test” has been used in other court cases, and the Office for Civil Rights has used it as a template for compliance with the *Lau v. Nichols* Supreme Court decision (Ovando & Collier, 1998).

Although court decisions often served as the engine driving bilingual education initiatives, the types of programs conceptualized and implemented during the opportunity period have varied considerably. Programs differ extensively as to how much, if any, non-English-language instruction teachers use. They also vary as to how many years of instruction students receive in their first language, and whether there is an effort to maintain the first language after the student has become fluent in English. In addition, the programs vary in their approach to inclusion of monolingual English speakers in bilingual programs. In general, programs can be classified as follows:

1. Structured immersion programs: There is no use of the native language, but students are given specialized ESL instruction tailored to levels of English proficiency.
2. Partial immersion programs: These programs provide ESL instruction, and a small amount of time (e.g., 1 hour each day) may be set aside temporarily for instruction in the native language, but the goal is to move to English as quickly as possible.
3. Transitional bilingual programs: These programs provide extensive instruction in the native language as well as in English. However, once a child attains a certain level of English proficiency, he or she is exited into a monolingual English program. The early-exit transitional bilingual programs mainstream students after 2 years or by the end of the second grade. A late-exit transitional program delays exiting students until the fifth or sixth grade. Programs vary and may not always adhere to these guidelines.
4. Maintenance or developmental bilingual education: Extensive instruction is provided in the native language as well as in English. Unlike students in transitional bilingual education, those in a maintenance or developmental program continue to receive part of their instruction in the native language even after they become proficient in English.
5. Two-way immersion programs: Speakers of both languages are placed together in a bilingual classroom to learn each other's language and to work academically in both languages. In a two-way program, the language-majority children become bilingual and biliterate alongside the language-minority children. For example, the English-speaking child learns Spanish while the Spanish-speaking child learns English within the same classroom.

The opportunist period, through federal legislation and court cases, as well as through community grassroots efforts, offered many opportunities for the development of bilingual education, thus affirming the civil rights of language-minority students. On the basis of developing research findings and increased experience, policy makers and educators had the opportunity to create strong language policies that held great promise for meeting the educational needs of English language learners. School districts through-

out the nation established a broad range of bilingual and ESL programs as the numbers of English language learners continued to grow through increased immigration.

However, despite its growth, bilingual education continued to remain controversial during this period, as evidenced by the 1972 finding of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that only a very small percentage of language-minority students were receiving appropriate bilingual or ESL instruction in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas: “While 6.5 percent of the schools in the survey area have bilingual programs, only 2.7 percent of the Mexican American student population is being reached. California . . . reaches only 1.7 percent of students with programs introduced into 5.9 percent of its schools” (p. 22). Furthermore, in 1982, Secretary of Education Terrel Bell estimated that “only about a third of the [ELL] children aged 5 to 14 . . . are receiving either bilingual instruction or instruction in English as a Second Language. . . . Schools in general are not meeting the needs of [ELL] children” (Crawford, 1999, p. 89).

### **The Dismissive Period: 1980s–Present**

The battle against bilingual education began to gain strength during the 1980s, challenging the previous 20-year period of program development and research activity. The politics of language education during the Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations provided the context for the anti-bilingual seeds that were sown during the 1980s and continued in the 1990s. In 1981, President Reagan stated, “It is absolutely wrong and against American concepts to have a bilingual education program that is now openly, admittedly dedicated to preserving their native language and never getting them adequate in English so they can go out into the job market and participate” (Crawford, 1999, p. 53). Reagan’s secretary of education, William Bennett, fought for no restriction on Title VII funding for English-only special alternative instructional programs. Following a legislative settlement in 1988, these programs were allowed to receive as much as 25% of Part A school program grants—up from a “cap” of 4% adopted in 1984. This shift in funds for English-only programs reflected a growing political opposition to education through children’s native languages.

Further weakening bilingual education, the *Lau* compliance standards developed by the Office for Civil Rights, which were based chiefly on the *Castañeda v. Pickard* guidelines for effective programs, were never published as official regulations. The Reagan administration quickly killed the Carter administration’s *Lau* regulations proposal, which would have mandated bilingual education programs in schools “where at least twenty-five [ELL] children of the same minority language group were enrolled in two consecutive elementary grades (K through 8)” (Crawford, 1999, p. 52). Also, it seems problematic that at a time when the number of language-minority students

was increasing, the number of Office for Civil Rights compliance reviews of districts' programs to meet the needs of language-minority students decreased significantly (González, 1994; Lyons, 1990; Ovando & Collier, 1998).

Beyond Washington, political activists across the nation began to press for a return to the sink-or-swim days and the melting pot ideology. Anti-bilingual education pressure groups such as U.S. English, English Only, and English First began to appear on the scene. At the same time, English Plus, the bilingual policy alternative that emerged in response to English-only efforts, failed to garner as much public support and media visibility as the anti-bilingual groups. In 1994, California voters approved Proposition 187, a ballot initiative designed to sharply curb illegal immigration through strong restrictions on the social and educational services that undocumented immigrants could receive.

Furthermore, during the dismissive period, the debate sharpened over how long, if at all, students' native languages should be used before language-minority students were transferred to an all-English classroom environment. This debate reached an all-time high when California voters determined in June 1998, through the passage of Proposition 227, that English should be the primary medium of instruction for language-minority students. Proposition 227 threw bilingual programs throughout the state into turmoil, with English learners receiving less help than before in their native languages. Teachers, university professors, researchers, and program directors involved with bilingual education were now required "to implement a program they cannot believe in because its underlying assumptions violate the theories and principles of effective education for language-minority students" (Mora, in Crawford, 1998/1999, p. 4).

Ron Unz, the initiator of Proposition 227, felt that children were staying "too long" in bilingual programs; he blamed ineffective bilingual education programs for failing to teach children English. It is ironic, however, that Proposition 227 blamed bilingual education for language-minority students' low achievement, given that only 30% of the estimated 1.4 million English language learners in California at the time were enrolled in bilingual programs (California Department of Education, 1997).

While bilingual education has generally been under political siege during the 1980s and 1990s, it has continued to have defenders. For example, in 1999, President Clinton's administration had finally restored funding cutbacks, totaling 38%, made by the Republican-controlled Congress between 1994 and 1996 (Crawford, 1997). More important, it forced Congress to drop three riders from a bill that would have: (a) given non-English speakers only 2 years to learn English, (b) increased the proportion of funds available for English immersion programs, and (c) given preferential funding to programs clearly implementing the 2-year limit, thus curtailing the establishment or continuation of maintenance and two-way bilingual programs (*NABE News*, 1998).

English Only, U.S. English, English First, Proposition 187, Proposition 227, and the proposed riders to federal bilingual funding can be seen collectively as instruments of the politics of resentment toward massive immigration from developing countries in the 1980s and 1990s, especially from Asia and Latin America. The significance of Proposition 227, for example, is viewed as a harbinger of similar measures in other states, such as Arizona, Colorado, Washington, and Massachusetts.

### **Current Challenges to the Defense of Bilingual Education**

Convincing politicians and the public that bilingual education is a theoretically sound and effective way to educate not only language-minority students but also language-majority students has been difficult. It is a challenge that we must overcome in order to move out of the dismissive period. National and international evidence already exists to prove that quality bilingual programs promote academic success, with the added bonus that students become bilingual (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cummins, 2000; Green, 1998; Krashen & Biber, 1998, 1999; Ramírez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Stanford Working Group, 1993; Willig, 1985). Crawford (1999) writes that “language-minority children are achieving at or near grade level by the time they leave well-designed bilingual programs, even in urban schools where failure was once the norm” (p. 12).

In an attempt to stem the adverse publicity that bilingual education has received, Krashen (1999) argues that bilingual programs have been condemned without a fair hearing. For example, Krashen notes that the high Latino dropout rate, often attributed to bilingual education, is in fact the result of a complex set of background variables. These include poverty, racism, an unempowering school culture (Cummins, 2000; Nieto, 1999), school tracking practices (Oakes, 1985; Olsen, 1997), a dearth of successfully schooled Latino role models, and a lack of engaging reading materials in the home and school environments. He also challenges the belief that immigrants in the past achieved the “American Dream” without bilingual instruction, pointing out that many immigrants had in fact received a form of de facto bilingual instruction because they had been schooled in their countries of origin. In addition, during the permissive period, many were schooled in the U.S. in their native languages. Krashen also refutes the false assumption that the United States is the only country that offers bilingual education to language-minority students, noting that bilingualism is common in most parts of the world (see also Grosjean, 1982).

Given the evidence in favor of bilingual education, why does there continue to be increased resistance and hostility? Such antipathy, especially toward strong forms of bilingual education, is rooted in nativistic and melting pot ideologies that tend to demonize the “other.” Because bilingual education is much more than a pedagogical tool, it has become a societal irritant involving complex issues of cultural identity, social class status, and language politics. Is language diversity a problem? Is it a resource? Is it a right? On the surface,

these issues seem quite remote from the day-to-day realities of bilingual classrooms across the United States, yet they are the basis on which bilingual education is either loved or hated (Ovando, 1990).

Aside from issues of power, much of the opposition to bilingual education arises from the fact that its rationale seems to run counter to widely held popular beliefs about how humans acquire languages. Intuitively, one would think that a person learns another language by using it frequently and by avoiding use of one's native language. While using a new language is crucial to developing communicative and academic competence in that language, the quality of the instructional process is equally important. More time spent immersed in the new language is not necessarily associated with greater gains in that language, if the student is not understanding the content of the lesson. Related to this, the climate for full cognitive development is absolutely crucial to the full development of the second language. One of the most common misconceptions is that children learn second languages with native-like pronunciation effortlessly and without pain—child's play, so to speak. Yet research suggests that young children may not reach full proficiency in their second language if cognitive development is discontinued in their primary language (Ovando & Collier, 1998). Given the prerequisites for second language acquisition, older learners from approximately ages 9 to 25 who have built cognitive and academic proficiency in their first language are potentially the most efficient acquirers of most aspects of academic second-language proficiency, except for pronunciation (Ovando & Collier, 1998).

While the perception persists that bilingual education creates dependency on the native language and discourages the acquisition of English, we know that language maintenance is the result of contextual variables such as the presence or absence of first- and second-language support in the community. In other words, English language acquisition does not take place simply because the school emphasizes it. Rather, the following variables must be present for bilingualism to occur:

(1) *Learners* who realize that they need to learn the target language and are motivated to do so; (2) *speakers of the target language* who know it well enough to provide the learners with access to the language and the help they need for learning it; and (3) *a social setting* which brings learners and target language speakers into frequent enough contact to make language learning possible. (Wong Fillmore, 1991, pp. 52–53)

Another problem in presenting a clear case for the effectiveness of bilingual education results from the confusion between program evaluation research and basic research. Much of the adverse publicity for bilingual education stems from a set of poor program evaluation results. Many researchers, however, feel that it is virtually impossible to control for all the background variables associated with bilingual education outcomes. A number of variables

can have a negative effect on the outcome of a particular bilingual program: the number of qualified bilingual teachers, parental support, administrative support, material resources, time allocation for the child's first language and the second language, the sociocultural and educational background of the community, and the general school curriculum and climate. Furthermore, it is not possible to have comparison groups of students receiving language assistance and those not receiving it, as the civil rights of students not receiving any services would be violated. Because of these difficulties and the politicized nature of the field, researchers such as August and Hakuta (1997) tend to favor basic research in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and developmental psychology rather than in program evaluation. Yet this approach has also been drawn into the political fray, as opponents of bilingual education often quote data or statements from basic research out of context to drive their own agenda.

Researchers who are trying to get the word out about the empirical outcomes of bilingual instruction face a dilemma—whether to be even-handed with the results and thus run the risk of providing fuel for the critics of bilingual education, or to report findings that affirm mother-tongue instruction results without providing enough empirical support for their claims. According to Crawford (1999), Collier and Thomas's research findings "reported overall patterns that confirm theories underlying bilingual education, such as a correlation between native-language development and long-term academic achievement," but they "declined to release sufficient data for others to assess their findings" (p. 258). As a result, this valuable research could not be used to influence the debate over Proposition 227.

So how should researchers of language-minority education respond to the above predicament—practice even-handedness or extreme caution when sharing data on empirical studies and outcomes? On the one hand, it would be ideal if in a nonpoliticized world they could concentrate on conducting empirical studies that illuminate pedagogical theories and practice for language-minority populations and leave it at that. On the other hand, because bilingual education has become an ideological lightning rod that tends to attract groups with a variety of pedagogical agendas, language-minority educators have no choice but to become better informed and engaged in the language policy debate. To hold their ground in the debate, however, they must have a clearly articulated strategy for addressing language issues within a political context to multiple publics. Crawford (2000b) suggests that "educators must learn to participate more effectively in the policy debate: not by distorting research evidence or by denouncing their opponents as racists, but by explaining bilingual pedagogies in a credible way—that is, in a political context that members of the public can understand and endorse" (p. 124).

The beginning of such a discussion took place at the 1999 National Association for Bilingual Education Conference in a presentation by James Crawford, Eugene García, Norman Gold, and Laurie Olsen. In a handout titled

*¿Qué pasó en California? Lessons from Proposition 227* (Olsen, 1999), the presenters proposed four guiding principles to advance the bilingual education movement into the 21st century:

1. “The push cannot be for bilingual education as an isolated educational program. We have to re-embed bilingual education in the larger frameworks of quality education and access for language-minority communities, promoting bilingualism for all (and foreign language policy), and ending the divisive tracking of children of different languages and skin colors and national backgrounds to different futures” (p. 1).
2. We must “create a tidal wave of a new vision of bilingual education and support for bilingual education as part of the cultures, economics, and values of language-minority communities” (p. 1).
3. We must “break the separation and isolation of bilingual education professionals and practitioners from language rights and immigrant rights movements” (p. 1).
4. We need to “build a strong grassroots base that is linked to educators and organization and policy alliances statewide. Build a sense of connectedness of people at local level to a larger statewide and national movement” (p. 1).

## Conclusion

Analyses of specific historical episodes within the permissive, restrictive, opportunist, and dismissive periods of language diversity challenge the notion of an a priori “American bilingual tradition.” While critiquing the various contending approaches, I have argued that language issues and policy in the United States have lacked ideological consistency for several reasons:

1. Politically, language was a minor issue, except during a few time periods (e.g., Americanization) and localities (e.g., California and New Mexico). It was much less likely to be a social fault line than race, religion, class, and various political causes.
2. Except during the Americanization period, language played a limited formal role in American nationalism because the English language had already achieved hegemony through status achievement. During the 19th century, geographic and social mobility assuaged fears about assimilation.
3. Policy decisions on language were typically subordinated to other considerations, such as the race and social status of minority-language speakers, which differed widely. These decisions, moreover, were almost always local ones, except in the case of Indian policy, in which cultural genocide was explicitly discussed as an extension of military policy. The 1906 Naturalization Act was the first federal language legislation ever passed.

4. At the turn of the 20th century, language policy restrictionism and promotion of English became more important as an ideological support for the new imperialism, as a practical instrument of colonial rule, and as a form of social control at home, directed at revolutionary immigrant workers.
5. After the draconian immigration policy of the 1920s, language again receded as an issue, largely because of the damage done during World War I. It was seen as such a moot question that 20th-century historians, even those concerned with immigrants, paid it limited attention. Then, the rebirth of bilingual education and the 1965 Immigration Act put language on the national agenda for the first time in several decades. The new policy, adopted with minimal public debate, shattered the ideological mold on language for those who were accustomed to the hegemony of English—creating a contentious symbolic issue.

Educators, politicians, and policy makers need to understand how notions of pedagogical effectiveness, symbolic racism or nationalism, instrumental efforts at social control, struggles for minority self-determination and equal rights, and interethnic competition have determined U.S. policies for educating language minorities. In pursuit of equity and social justice for all children, the local, state, and national leaders of today and tomorrow must have a clear sense of how diverse groups have succeeded, or failed, in getting attention for their language needs. Likewise, such leaders must also understand why and how opponents have prevailed in various periods in discrediting the benefits of quality bilingual education pedagogy. Ultimately, to create a society that empowers linguistically marginalized groups, we need to know whether this history has been a repetitive cycle of ethnically conscious minorities struggling to maintain their identities versus an ethnocentric and racist majority seeking to repress them, or whether intraethnic divisions, class mobility, broader trends in school reform, or civil rights are responsible for the historical verdict.

As a nation peopled with conquered indigenous groups and involuntary and voluntary immigrant communities, we have struggled from the beginning with an uneasy balance between *unum* and *pluribus*. The debate will continue, as there are no universal ways to meet the multiple publics associated with the United States' democratic tradition. One thing is on the side of pluralism, however—the country's longstanding constitutional principles that affirm equality and social justice for all. There are two possible paths that we can take. One is the language-affirming path of two-way bilingual education, in which language-minority children and children from monolingual English homes learn side by side in multilingual classrooms, becoming bilingual and cross-culturally competent together (Lindholm & Molina, 2000). The other is the predominant path of the 1980s and 1990s: resisting the use of languages other than English in classrooms.

Basic research indicates that if we choose the English-only path, we will shortchange language-minority students, preventing them from developing

their full potential. Assimilation and language acquisition do not take place through coercion (Fishman, 1991), nor do they take place when children are deprived of cognitive and academic development in their first language before they have mastered academic English. Full cognitive development occurs in language-affirming classroom contexts that build on students' linguistic foundations, rather than destroying them.

Researchers, policy makers, school administrators, parents, and teachers need to be passionate about providing a first-rate educational environment for *all* children, not only for those who speak standard English. Such quality education, however, will require action that articulates the past 30 years' positive research findings on bilingualism, clarifies misunderstandings about the nature of bilingual education, and overcomes xenophobic fears of a perceived attack on the hegemony of English. Such action can lead the nation out of the dismissive period and into a more enlightened era in bilingual education. In the words of Eduardo Hernández-Chávez (1988), "The denial of a people's development and use of its native tongue is thus a denial of its participation in society and of its very peoplehood" (p. 45).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers, James Crawford, and Jane Lyle for their insightful comments and valuable suggestions for improving this manuscript. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 19–23, Montreal, Québec, Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this attitude persisted even much later. See, for example, San Francisco Unified School District's response to the *Lau* plaintiffs (1974) in Crawford, 1999, pp. 44–46.

<sup>3</sup> This case is about an elementary school teacher who was convicted under Nebraska's Norval Act (1921) for teaching a 10-year-old student to read and write in German. According to the Norval Act, instructing children in a foreign tongue was un-American.

<sup>4</sup> As we enter the new millennium, Title VII reflects the twists and turns of our shifting ideology regarding the education of language-minority students.

School reform presented a rare opportunity for bipartisanship following the disputed presidential election of 2000. Immediately after taking office, President George W. Bush offered his proposal for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—"No Child Left Behind"—and made it the centerpiece of his domestic agenda. Lawmakers responded by putting aside ideological divisions and seeking ways to compromise. For Democrats, the top priority was increased funding for school programs; for Republicans, more local "flexibility" and less federal control over how the money would be spent. Both parties stressed greater "accountability for results" in the form of higher academic standards, required annual testing in Grades 3 through 8, and increasingly severe sanctions for "failing schools." The final bill ran nearly 1,200 pages, incorporating these and other policy changes, the most sweeping since 1965. When it came to bilingual education, Congress moved to demolish the structure it had created seven years earlier. It is fair to say that the Bilingual Education Act, as conceived in 1968, died a quiet death in 2001; most of its functions were inherited by the states (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003).