Teachers' Opinions About the Theoretical and Practical Aspects of the Use of Native Language Instruction for Language Minority Students: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

The results of studies analyzing teachers' opinions about the theoretical and practical aspects of the use of native language instruction for language minority students appear to reflect a clear discrepancy: There is strong support for the underlying theory, while there is less support for its practical implementation. The present study analyzed 218 K–8 teachers' responses to a questionnaire dealing with the aforementioned issue. In addition, the study also examined which factors influenced their opinions, and whether their opinions varied across different grades (K–2nd, 3rd–4th, 5th–8th). Consistent with previous research, support for the theoretical principles underlying the use of the students' native language was strong. Support for its practical implementation was less positive. No clear predictors of attitudes toward the issue being investigated were found. Alongside, no significant variations in opinions were found among the groups in which the teachers were clustered (K–2, 3–4, 5–8). The results of the present study appear to indicate that teachers were guided by their own beliefs at the time of answering the survey. The need for more research in this area is underscored, as is the need to incorporate and take into consideration teachers' personal opinions, feedback, and input at the time of designing teacher preparation programs.

Introduction

Many scholars have described what they consider are the necessary conditions and requirements to establish programs that address the needs of language minority students. In their publications, they have emphasized the importance of understanding cultural and linguistic differences, the use of the students' primary language in the classroom, or the strategies teachers should

implement in order to meet the linguistic and academic needs of limited English proficient students. The research carried out in this field is undoubtedly aimed at providing educators with a solid and ample base on which to found their practices.

A large number of the aforementioned publications (e.g., August & Hakuta, 1998; Krashen, 1996) have underscored the importance of implementing programs that utilize the students' primary language in order to deliver content, to help pupils develop primary and secondary language literacy, and to ascertain that students are able to understand the concepts explained in the classroom. Clearly, in order to ensure the success of these programs it seems necessary to count on teachers who are properly trained, fluent in the language of the students, and willing to participate in the programs. This calls for an examine teachers' voices in order to have a better understanding of their knowledge and beliefs about the use of primary language instruction in the classroom. The present study attempted to do so by: (a) investigating teachers' opinions about the theoretical and practical principles of the use of native language instruction with language minority students, (b) examining what factors may influence their opinions about the issue, and (c) examining whether their opinions showed any variations across the grades.

Literature Review

Research in the area of teachers' opinions has been traditionally scarce due to two main causes: (a) teachers' thoughts are unobservable; therefore, they are not as easily measured and evaluated as actions and their perceivable effects (Clark & Peterson, 1986); and (b) the distinction between knowledge and beliefs, two of the constructs that appear to have the greatest influence on teachers' thoughts and their actions, was not clear despite several efforts aimed at defining them (Elbaz, 1983; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Shulman, 1986). It was not until Pajares (1992) used Nespor's (1987) framework of "belief systems" that some light was shed on this issue.

In his work, Nespor (1987) considered that knowledge systems have a cognitive nature, while belief systems have an affective nature. Therefore, he established the linkage knowledge-theory and beliefs-practice. Along this line, Pajares (1992), after reviewing the literature on the topic (Brown & Cooney, 1982; Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988; Harvey, 1986; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Sigel, 1985), described knowledge as based on objective facts, and beliefs as based on personal evaluation and judgment. Studies that have analyzed the relationship between these two constructs have focused especially on the influence of beliefs on teachers' practices (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) due to their strong affective component, which makes beliefs "the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives" (Pajares, 1992, p. 307). The results of several studies that have examined this relationship

in different content areas (e.g., Johnson, 1992, in English as a second language; Longberger, 1992, in reading; Mangano & Allen, 1986, in language arts) appear to reveal the tremendous impact that teachers' personal beliefs have on their practices, decision making and behaviors.

Linguistic Minorities and Native Language Instruction

Most of the aforementioned studies were carried out in mainstream classrooms. However, due to the increasing numbers of English Language Learners (Macías, 1999) currently enrolled in American schools, more recent research has focused on the linguistic and academic needs of language minority students (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cummins, 1996, 2000; Díaz-Rico, 2000; González & Darling-Hammond, 2000) and on the importance of understanding their cultural and linguistic background in order for them to have increasing opportunities for success and to gain status (Díaz-Rico, 2000). As a result of these investigations researchers appear to agree that one of the factors that most clearly impacts the schooling of language minority students is the use of their primary language in the classroom (Díaz-Rico, 2000; Cummins,1996; Cummins, 2000; Krashen, 1996).

According to Krashen (1996), the use of the students' native tongue provides them with knowledge and literacy. The development of these two factors, coupled with comprehensible input in English, accelerates the students' English acquisition process. This constitutes the foundation of bilingual education programs.

Teachers are one of the key components of these programs, because they are responsible for providing the necessary instruction to their students. Therefore, investigating their opinions about the programs in which they are participating appears to be of the utmost importance. However, traditionally, teachers have lacked representation in public forums and their points of view have been often overlooked in the research. This has been clearly summarized by Lemberger (1992): "much of the literature on bilingual education focuses on its legal, political and methodological aspects. What is missing from the literature are the teachers' voices" (p. 1).

Qualitative and Quantitative Studies

Only a handful of studies have given voice to teachers and have examined their opinions about native language instruction and students' participation in bilingual education programs. Some of them did so qualitatively (Bos & Reyes, 1996; Jiménez, Gersten & Rivera, 1996; Lemberger, 1992, 1996), others quantitatively (Aguirre, 1984; Beckett, 1997; Mora, 1998, 1999; Shin & Krashen, 1996), and one more used a combination of both approaches (Rueda & García, 1996).

The results of those articles that examined the issue qualitatively (Bos & Reyes, 1996; Jiménez, Gersten & Rivera, 1996; Lemberger, 1992, 1996) revealed that respondents showed strong support for the theoretical and practical aspects of bilingual education. In addition, participants' answers appeared to show a clear alignment between the knowledge they possessed and the practical implementation of the main components of the program. On the other hand, some of the studies that examined the issue quantitatively (Beckett, 1997; Mora, 1998, 1999; Rueda & García, 1996; Shin & Krashen, 1996) revealed an interesting contradiction: Participants appeared to show strong support for the theoretical underpinnings of bilingual education (knowledge), while they appeared not to support its practical implementation (beliefs) so enthusiastically.

The purpose of the present study, therefore, was to add to this line of research by examining teachers' voices about this issue. In order to do so, three research questions were explored:

1. What are teachers' opinions about the theoretical and practical aspects of the use of native language instruction with language minority students?
2. Which factors influence their opinions?
3. Do teachers' beliefs toward primary language instruction for minority students vary for teachers working in lower (kindergarten, 1st, 2nd), middle (3th, 4th), and upper (5th, 6th, 7th, 8th) grades?

Method

Subjects

Five hundred eighty two K–8 teachers from two southern California school districts that showed interest in participating in the present project were invited to fill out a questionnaire. The total number of surveys returned was 218, a 37.46% return rate. One hundred thirty-six surveys (62.38%) proceeded from District 1 (K–6), and eighty-two (37.61%) from District 2 (K–8). Table 1 summarizes the information provided by the subjects.

Table 1

Characteristics of Subjects

			District 1			District 2		
			N	%		N	%	
Grade taught								
K-1-2			69	50.73		38	46.34	
3-4			46	33.82		21	25.61	
5-6-7-8			20	14.70		23	28.05	
Years present grade								
Less than 7			103	75.73		71	86.58	
More than 7			32	23.53		11	13.41	
Years total								
Less than 7			63	46.32		47	57.32	
More than 7			73	53.68		33	40.24	
Training and credentials								
BCLAD			42	31.10		20	24.70	
CLAD			51	37.80		26	32.10	
SB69			5	3.70		-	-	
SDAIE			22	16.30		8	9.90	
Other			2	1.50		9	1.20	
None			13	9.60		26	32.10	

Table 1 (cont.)

Characteristics of Subjects

			District 1			District 2		
			N	%		N	%	
Proficiency in another language								
Listening								
(Very) fluent			93	68.90			42	51.20
Basic			17	12.60			8	9.80
Few Words/None			25	18.50			32	39.00
Speaking								
(Very) fluent			88	65.20			40	48.90
Basic			15	11.10			10	12.20
Few Words/None			32	23.70			32	39.00
Reading								
(Very) fluent			88	64.70			36	44.50
Basic			17	12.50			9	11.10
Few Words/None			31	22.80			36	44.40
Writing								
(Very) fluent			83	61.40			34	42.00
Basic			20	14.80			10	12.30
Few Words/None			32	23.70			37	45.70

Instrument

The questionnaire used for this study consisted of 22 items, divided into two sections. The first section (items 1—5) intended to gather some information about the participants, such as grade taught, number of years teaching present grade, total number of years as a teacher, second language acquisition training, and self-rating of proficiency in a second language.

The second section of the questionnaire (items 6 through 22) consisted of 17 statements for participants to rate according to a seven-point Likert scale. This section concentrated on teachers' opinions about the theory and practice of the use of native language instruction for language minority students. The statements were drawn from questionnaires published by Rueda and García (1996), Shin and Krashen (1996), Aguirre (1984), and Williams (1997).

Procedure

Two contact persons (one in each district), designated by each superintendent, received the surveys that were mailed to them at the district offices. Each survey was enclosed in a stamped envelope, addressed to the researcher. The two contact persons handed the surveys to the school principals during their first regularly scheduled meeting with the superintendent. The principals, in turn, handed the surveys to the teachers during their first staff meeting at their school site.

The teachers were asked to complete the surveys at their leisure and to place them in the envelope provided. Each participant received a coupon for a local coffeehouse as compensation for his/her participation in the project.

Data Coding

A description of the coding system used follows:

1. Due to the differences between both districts, "District" was included as one of the independent variables in the study.
2. Grade taught, number of years teaching the present grade, and number of years teaching overall received their numerical value.
3. Item 4 requested information about credentials, because teachers who provide instruction to English language learners in California must have appropriate authorization. Thus, teachers holding the Bilingual, Crosscultural, Language and Academic Development Certificate (BCLAD) received a 5; holders of the Crosscultural, Language and Academic Development Certificate (CLAD), received a 4; teachers who had the SB69 certificate, received a 3; teachers with basic SDAIE training received a 2; teachers with other training received a 1; and teachers with no training received a 0.
4. Responses to item 5, self rating of proficiency in a second language, were coded on a four point scale: 4 = very fluent; 3 = somewhat fluent; 2 = basic conversation; 1 = a few words and 0 = not at all. For the purposes of this project, the categories were collapsed into "very fluent/fluent," "basic conversation," and "a few words/not at all."

The second part of the measure, items 6 through 22, consisted of a series of statements that participants rated according to a seven-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from "very strongly agree" to "very strongly disagree," with "no opinion" as the neutral midpoint.

Data Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to examine how the items in the second part of the survey held together. Correlations between the predictors used in this study (grade taught, years teaching present grade, total number of years of teaching experience, second language training, district, and the four skills in which second language fluency was divided) and teachers' responses to the second part of the survey were examined. Two separate stepwise regression analyses were carried out in order to examine the relationship between the predictors and teachers' responses. Finally, ANOVA was used to examine any possible variations in teachers' responses across the grades. In order to do so, participants were divided into three different groups according to the grade they were teaching: (a) kindergarten, first, and second grade; (b) third and fourth grades; and (c) fifth, sixth, seventh, and eight grades. This classification was based on the rationale of transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs (Milk, 1993), which had been widely implemented in California: students in kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grades received a fairly large amount of primary language instruction; students in grades 3 and 4 had initiated their transition to formal reading and writing in English, and students in grades 5 and above had been placed in mainstream English classes for the most part (LAUSD, 1996).

Findings and Discussion

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of subjects' responses to the first part of the survey (items 1 through 5). The results of an independent samples t-test conducted to analyze the differences between the means of teachers' responses to the first part of the survey showed significant differences in grade taught (t [216] = 2.569, p <.05), second language training (t [214] = 2.952, p <.01), and the four skills in which second language fluency was divided (listening [t [215] = 2.784, p <.01], speaking [t [215] = 2.656, p <.01], reading [t [215] = 3.183, p <.01], and writing [t [214] = 2.915, p <.01]. However, the results of further analyses conducted using ANOVA allowed to ignore these differences (see Table 6).

The part of the survey dealing with teachers' attitudes toward native language instruction (items 6 through 22) was subjected to an exploratory factor analysis with three factors (items 7, 12, and 19 were not included because they were not relevant for this study). Since only items 15 and 21 loaded into the third factor and they showed low reliability (.53), they were deleted from further analyses.

The remaining items were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (Table 3) using two factors: theory (items 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 16) and practice (items 13, 14, 17, 18, 20, and 22).

Table 2

Descriptor Means

	M	SD	N
Grade taught			
District 1	2.50	1.79	136
District 2	3.23	2.17	82
Years current level			
District 1	5.83	5.89	135
District 2	4.59	5.82	82
Years teaching			
District 1	11.38	8.42	136
District 2	10.76	10.95	80
L2 training			
District 1	3.52	1.57	135
District 2	2.73	2.08	81
Fluency listening			
District 1	2.92	1.43	135
District 2	2.29	1.70	82
Fluency speaking			
District 1	2.73	1.46	135
District 2	2.17	1.60	82
Fluency reading			
District 1	2.74	1.51	136
District 2	2.05	1.62	81
Fluency writing			
District 1	2.59	1.46	135
District 2	1.96	1.62	81

Table 3

Factor Loadings for Confirmatory Factor Model of Theory/Practice Variables Component

	Component	
	1	2
Item 11	.880	
Item 8	.832	
Item 10	.772	
Item 6	.761	
Item 9	.748	.381
Item 16	.629	.386
Item 17*		.794
Item 14*		.763
Item 13*		.753
Item 18*	.301	.679
Item 20*	.438	.534
Item 22*		.453

Extraction methods: Principal Component Analysis Rotation method, Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Notes: Rotation converged in 3 iterations

*Item was reverse coded

Items grouped under the descriptor theory represented the theoretical principles of native language instruction (Krashen, 1994, 1996) and, therefore, of knowledge (Deford, 1985; Pajares, 1992; Shavelson, 1983). Items grouped under the descriptor *practice were* intended to elicit teachers' personal opinions regarding primary language use implementation in the classroom. They, therefore, represented beliefs (Deford, 1985; Pajares, 1992; Shavelson, 1983).

The high reliability (coefficient alpha) of the items that composed the two factors (.8974 and .8059, respectively) permitted the creation of two combined scores that were used for subsequent analyses in this study.

Table 4 shows the means of participants' responses to the individual items that composed the two factors.

Table 4

"Theory" Means

	M	SD	N
6. High levels of literacy in two languages can result in higher development of knowledge or mental skills.	1.80	1.31	218
8. A child who can read and write in his/her first language will be able to learn English faster and easier (as opposed to children who cannot read and write in their first language).	1.98	1.46	218
9. A child who is not proficient in English would do better in school if he/she learns to read and write in his/her first language.	2.68	1.77	218
10. Learning subject matter in the first language helps the English Language Learner learn subject matter better when he/she studies it in English.	2.41	1.62	218
11. Students' development of literacy in the first language will facilitate the development of reading and writing in English.	2.08	1.47	218
16. The use of the native language in the classroom allows English Language Learners to base their learning of English on the conceptual knowledge they possess in their first language.	2.47	1.49	218
"Practice" Means*			
13. The use of the primary language in the classroom should stop as soon as the English Language Learner learns English.	4.46	1.88	218
14. Core curriculum instruction in primary language will result in a poor level of English proficiency because the English Language Learner will use his/her native language in the classroom instead of speaking English.	4.81	1.88	218
17. Using the native language in the classroom will have a negative effect on the English Language Learners' ability to learn English.	5.32	1.76	218
18. If an English Language Learner is in an English-only classroom, he/she will learn English better.	4.65	1.94	218
20. Teaching English Language Learners in both English and their native language results in language confusion for them.	5.27	1.63	218
22. An English Language Learner can successfully participate in regular English classes with one period of native language instruction tutorial.	4.58	1.72	218

*Items were reverse coded in the analysis

Participants' responses appeared to agree with the underlying principles of bilingual education. Thus, they showed strong support for primary language literacy development, which facilitates the acquisition of English (items 8, 11, and 16), and for subject matter instruction in the primary language, which helps children learn subject matter in English (item 10). In addition, teachers appeared to acknowledge the advantages of biliteracy (item 6), although they showed less support for teaching reading and writing to English Language Learners in their primary language (item 9).

Responses to the items dealing with practical aspects of the implementation of the aforementioned programs showed less support. Thus, teachers "slightly" disagreed with the idea that the use of two languages in the classroom has a negative effect on the English acquisition process of the students (item 17), and with the notion that the use of two languages results in language confusion for them (item 20). Regarding program placement, teachers did not appear to favor maintenance bilingual education (item 13) or to be opposed to placing English language learners in English-only classes (item 18).

Very remarkably, participants' responses to the *theory* and *practice* sections of the survey appeared to show clear contradictions. For example, participants recognized the value of achieving literacy in two languages (item 6), but they did not appear to strongly support primary language maintenance (item 13). Additionally, they supported primary language literacy development (items 8, 11, and 16), but they did not strongly reject the statements that attributed negative consequences (item 17), a poor level of literacy development in the students' second language (item 14), or language confusion (item 20) to this development. Finally, despite having shown support for the underlying principles of bilingual education, participants did not strongly oppose the placement of English language learners in English-only classrooms (item 18).

Correlations between the predictors used in this study and the theory and practice composite scores are shown in Table 5.

No significant correlation was found between credential possessed and either the *theory* or *practice* scores, even though nearly 85% of the teachers participating in this study acknowledged either being in possession of a credential or having received second language acquisition training (Table 1). Additionally, neither years of experience teaching the same grade nor years of experience overall appeared to have an impact on teachers' opinions.

Table 5

Correlations Between Predictors and Scores

	Theory	Practice°
Grade taught	.165*	-.178**
Years current level	.018	-.098
Years teaching	.090	-.137*
L2 training	-.101	.099
Fluency listening	-.250***	.309***
Fluency speaking	-.286***	.337***
Fluency reading	-.264***	.324***
Fluency writing	-.282***	.340***

Notes: *p < .5. **p < .01. ***p < .001. °Items were reverse coded

Small negative correlations were found between listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a second language and the *theory* composite score, and small correlations were found between the aforementioned abilities and the *practice* composite score. According to these results, the more fluent the teachers in a second language, the less likely they were to support the theoretical underpinnings of the use of native language instruction; however, they were more likely to agree with the items in the *practice* section of the survey. It appeared that teachers were guided by their own personal experiences as second language learners or speakers rather than by the knowledge or experience they had acquired.

Two separate stepwise regression analyses were carried out in this study. The results of the first analysis showed "fluency speaking" a second language as the only significant predictor of support for the *theory* score, although it only explained 7.8% of the variance. The results of the second analysis showed "fluency writing" and "district" as the only significant predictors of support for the *practice* component, although they only combined for 16.4% of the variance explained. Concurrent with Shin and Krashen (1996), this reflects a very incomplete picture of the predictors of teachers' opinions about bilingual education.

Table 6

Predictors of Support for Theory and Practice

Theory					
	B	Beta	SE	t	p
Fluency speaking	.226	-.280	.054	-4.211	.000
F = 17.730, df = 1/209 p < .001					
Practice					
	B	Beta	SE	t	p
Fluency writing	-.320	-.387	.054	-5.967	.000
District	-.596	-.225	.172	-3.477	.001
F change = 27.234, df = 1/209, p < .001 R square = .115 F change = 12.087, df = 1/208, p < .001 R square = .164					

ANOVA was carried out in order to examine any possible variations in teachers' opinions among the groups in which participants were clustered. Table 7 shows how there were no significant differences among the groups regarding teachers' opinions about the *theory* and/or *practice* of bilingual education.

Table 7

Variations in Teachers' Support Across the Grades

	SS	df	MS	F	p
Theory	4.668	2	2.334	1.515	.222
Practice	6.733	2	3.366	2.049	.131

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study confirm the existing discrepancy, revealed in other projects carried out in the field (Mora, 1999; Rueda & García, 1996; Shin & Krashen, 1996) between participants' support for the theoretical and practical aspects of the implementation of bilingual education programs. In the present study, participants showed strong support for the theoretical principles of bilingual education (primary language literacy development and subject matter instruction delivered in the students' primary language, Krashen, 1996), but their support for aspects related to the practical implementation of the aforementioned principles decreased considerably.

It should be emphasized, though, that participants were not strongly opposed to the use of native language instruction (Table 4). This aspect has great relevance in the aftermath of Proposition 227 (Unz & Tuchman, 1998), approved by California voters in June 1998, which imposed fierce restrictions against the use of students' primary languages in the classroom. The results of the present project, which was carried out nearly a year after the passage of the initiative, show that teachers continued to value the positive contributions made by primary language literacy development to the education of linguistic minorities.

The results of this study also show that the knowledge imparted in credential classes and teacher preparation programs did not appear to influence teachers' opinions. Rather, teachers appeared to be guided by their own personal beliefs at the time of answering the survey. This was confirmed by the results of the regression analysis, in which no clear predictors of teachers' opinions toward native language instruction were found. In addition, the large amount of unexplained variance appeared to indicate the presence of other factors impacting teachers' opinions about the issue being investigated. Previous studies carried out in the area emphasized the importance of personal points of view (Beckett, 1997) or external pressure (Rueda & García, 1996) to learn English, for example.

Therefore, it appears necessary to continue expanding the body of research in this area, focusing both on the content delivered in the credentialing classes and on the opinions of the teachers participating in them. It might be that the content provided in the classes does not address the needs of the participants, or that feedback from the participants is not taken into consideration when developing the syllabus. In any case, an exploration of these aspects might help shed some light on the issue and result in more accurate information on how knowledge and beliefs affect teachers' opinions and, subsequently, their practices.

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