

**Bilingual Education:  
A Controversial Issue**

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## Statement of the Problem

Currently, there are nearly 4.2 million Limited English Proficiency (LEP) school children in America; with each year, increasing numbers of these students enroll in our nation's classrooms (Goldenberg, 2001). This includes the largest minority group among children under the age of 18 being of Latino decent and Spanish speaking (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000); therefore, we choose to focus on educating the Latino-American community. While we do recognize the term "Latino" misrepresents the many nationalities grouped under this name, for the purpose of our project, our research (and the U.S. Census) has used "Latino" to represent the traditionally Spanish speaking population and its associated ethnic groups. This surge of non-English speaking students presents educators across the country with the obligation to give them the equal opportunity in education everyone rightfully deserves. Bilingual education programs are designed to "help immigrant children learn the English language so that they can do regular school work with their English speaking classmates and receive an equal educational opportunity" (Porter, 1998).

The problems created by bilingual education can negatively affect LEP students. Because LEP students do not understand their English speaking teachers and peers, they are presented with the challenge to compete academically. One indication that Latino students are not getting an equal education is the alarming level of their high school dropout rates--3.5 times the rate of white non-Latinos (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Putting aside the fact that LEP students do not fully understand the English language, they are completely capable of succeeding in the classroom. For example, in Denver, Colorado, LEP students who took a Spanish version of a standardized test outscored their English speaking peers by nearly 60 percent in one particular district (Roos, 2001). Beyond the academic challenges, LEP students are also faced with social obstacles. Because the structure of the English classroom traditionally caters to white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant males, it creates a cultural bias (Kagan, 1985, p. 266). LEP students are ostracized from their classmates because they are not able to communicate well with them. Some bilingual programs divide students up according to the language spoken in their homes, creating linguistic segregation within the schools. Teachers are also affected with

the surrounding issues of bilingual education. Unless they are foreign language educators, teachers graduating from the University of Georgia generally lack the preparation necessary to successfully educate non-English speaking students.

The struggles LEP students face in school have long-term implications in the Latino community. LEP students who do not achieve fluent English while in the public school system will be placed in the working field as non English-speaking adults. They, in turn, are not able to acquire careers and usually resort to cheap, hard labor jobs such as working in factories, carpet mills, and construction. If LEP students are not taught English and are not educated well, it will create a cycle of ignorance of the English language amongst the Latino community. A strong majority of Latino parents realize this cycle and when polled they “favored the learning of English as the first order of business for their children, a priority of more urgent importance than learning school subjects and far ahead of reading and writing in Spanish” (Porter, 1998).

When addressing the challenge of educating LEP students in English and academic subjects, schools have to decide first whether to implement a bilingual education program, and second, must choose from a variety of methods. This decision process is influenced by many factors such as community support, political agendas, government and local funding, and the ability of teachers to institute bilingual pedagogy.

The term bilingual generates different reactions... For some it may mean learning subject matter in two languages, or the ability of a person to speak or use two languages equally well; for others, it means a threat to the supremacy of the English language, and is therefore, anti-American (Caso, 1980, p. 56).

These differing views create intense debates regarding if and what type of bilingual education methods are appropriate.

The different types of bilingual education programs are as follows: 1. English Immersion programs, sometimes called the “sink or swim” method, have instruction entirely in English. Teachers strive to deliver lessons in simplified English so that students simultaneously learn English and academic

subjects. 2. English as a Second Language (ESOL) programs incorporate LEP students into the regular classroom, but typically require one period each day for them to work strictly on English skills. 3. Transitional Bilingual Education provides instruction for some subjects in the student's native language, but a certain amount in each day is spent on developing English skills. Classes are made up of students who share the same native language. 4. Two-way bilingual education programs allow instruction to be given in two languages to students, usually in the same classroom, who may be dominant in one language or the other, with the goal of the students becoming proficient in both languages. Teachers usually team-teach, with each one responsible to teach in only one of the languages.

### **Review of Literature**

One scholar from the University of Southern California, Stephen Krashen has volumes on arguments for keeping his "Eastman plan," a form of transitional bilingual education used primarily in California. The philosophy behind Krashen's views is that subject matter knowledge gained through the first language helps make the English the LEP children hear and read more comprehensible, while literacy gained in one language transfers to the second language (1999, p. *vii*). The overzealousness towards his "Eastman" model has caused Krashen to overlook the injustices in transitional bilingual education programs. He feels that "making bilingual education so successful that there is simply no doubt of its effectiveness" is a way to overcome the intense opposition to bilingual education (1996, p. 65).

Such intense opposition to Krashen's "Eastman" model is Rosalie Porter, an ex-New Jersey bilingual education teacher. She forms an argument centered around how the current bilingual programs seemed to neglect children, offered no special help, and sometimes were put in classes for the mentally retarded. She feels that "the theories being pronounced as 'gospel' at the University of Massachusetts did not match the reality of the classroom" (1998). Although she does acknowledge that bilingual education has benefited those it was intended for by means of making the real needs known, extra funding, and support of parental understanding and involvement, she feels that the current transitional bilingual program is actually doing a disservice to the LEP students by keeping them in their native language

classes for years longer than the program calls. She cites instances when Latino parents have tried to remove their children from bilingual education classes and “teachers and principles [would then] tell parents that their children will fail in English language classrooms. They play on ethnic pride, [falsely] asserting that children of Latino background need to be taught in Spanish to improve their self-esteem” (1998). Porter’s personal experiences in the classroom using transitional methods of bilingual education closed her off to the positive aspects of other types of bilingual programs.

Also a proponent of immersion methods is Peter Duignan, who received his M.A. and Ph. D. from Stanford University where he still researches under the Hoover Institution. Duignan believes that the total immersion system still works best for a bilingual education program, but he does think that “a year of ‘sheltered English immersion’ should be required before placing them [LEP students] in English-only classrooms” (1998, p. 41). He also feels that there are many misunderstandings when it comes to bilingual education and that this becomes a problem when the purposes of the programs implemented are sometimes lost in the midst of trying to carry them out. Duignan’s philosophy on bilingual education is comprised of a program where all students are taught all academic courses in all English and where “a transition year or two [could] be provided for those who do not speak English” (1998, p. 51). He feels total immersion is supported by an example in the Los Angeles Times where Latino voters favored an initiative to end the bilingual education programs by 84 percent, in effect showing that many Latino parents and students want to be learning English in school. Duignan is convinced that “‘becoming proficient in the language of America is a price that any immigrant should want to pay’ and so should their children” (1998, p. 51). Duignan argues that immersion is the best method, but he does not take into account that different methods may be more appropriate in contrasting areas of the country.

Dr. Amado M. Padilla, a professor of Education at Stanford University believes that the ultimate goal of the American education system should be “a language competent society” (1990, p. 22). He sees the need for all residents of the United States, both natural citizens and immigrants to have the opportunity to develop the highest possible degree of comprehension in speaking, reading, and writing in English. He disagrees with the immersion method of bilingual education, because he views it as being

“subtractive” in the sense that the immersion method seeks to replace the students’ native tongue and “fails to maintain true bilingual proficiency” (1990, p. 12). He does not, however, outline a specific curriculum to correctly implement his views into the classroom.

“Because there is so much variation from one bilingual education context to another in the United States,” researchers need to study “..*how* and *why* actual bilingual programs function the way they do in specific social and historical locations,” states Rebecca Freeman, an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania (1998, pp. 1-2). She researches how U.S. schools can organize their programs and practices so that low-income Latino students can achieve. In her book, Bilingual Education and Social Change, Freeman studies Oyster Bilingual School and feels that they have “successfully organized its program and practices so that the linguistic and cultural diversity of its student population is drawn on as a resource to be developed, and not as a problem to be overcome” (1998, p.247).

### **Analysis and Recommendations**

Through researching approximately twenty books, eighty newspaper articles, and ten online journals, our group has come to the conclusion that ESOL programs are the most successful and the least controversial in achieving the purpose of teaching English to LEP students. However, we do recognize that different programs may be more successful than others, given the contrasting environments of the communities. An example in Georgia where ESOL programs have worked is a school in Dalton, where nearly 43% of their community is of Latino decent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). This program, “The Georgia Project”, is one which uses ESOL classes and also has a teacher exchange program. The teacher exchange program involves American teachers traveling to Monterrey, Mexico to learn the language and culture and Mexican teachers coming to America to help the Dalton school accommodate their large Spanish speaking population (Fortune, 2000).

In making recommendations for change, educational policymakers, schools, teachers, administrators, students, and communities all have responsibilities to improve the process of teaching English to their limited English proficient population.

Local school boards can initiate referendums, in effect letting the population decide which method of instruction would best suit their communities. In response to one particular school board's lack of democratic values, the California Latino population banded together for the support of (and eventual passage by 61%) Proposition 227 (Porter, 1998). This highly controversial legislation reformed the existing transitional bilingual education programs and implemented a sheltered English immersion program; it is still in the Appeals Court at the demand of pro-bilingual educators and supporters. This example shows that the school boards need to adopt more democratic processes of making educational policies that affect their communities.

Schools can offer after school language enrichment programs, planned multicultural assemblies where minorities are instrumental in the organization and content, and provide bilingual counselors and career advisors. Teachers can also promote multiculturalism by integrating diverse perspectives into their curricula and discussions. Marie Arana, author of Havana Dreams: A Story of Cuba, grew up in a household of tension between Peruvian culture and American ideologies and certainly supports multicultural programs in the schools, believing that "it's the cross-fertilization that improves things!" (Gimbel, 2001, 7.7.1).

By promoting multiculturalism throughout the school, administrators can help encourage and promote the school's and teacher's efforts to successfully educate the limited English speaking community. This helps the LEP students by integrating them into the school atmosphere and community, making them feel more secure within and a part of the student body.

Students can become involved through student organizations, such as the student council, foreign language clubs, and international student groups. These organizations can help implement a student buddy system that would involve helping new students, especially those who are LEP, with being

accustomed to the school. Communities can establish English classes for parents and provide interpreters at PTA meetings, school board hearings, and parent-teacher conferences.

In all the research we encountered, the authors could find sociological surveys that supported their viewpoints. This seems fundamentally contradictory. Therefore, we feel that researchers, too, have an obligation to improve bilingual education. Their objective studies can show what programs work, and, even more importantly, how and why they have achieved their goals, and in what social contexts the different methods have been proven to succeed.

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