

Bilingual Education

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Since the first bilingual school opened, bilingual education programs have been controversial. Traditional bilingual education (TBE) programs operate under the idea that immigrant students newly integrated into American schools “cannot learn English quickly and must be taught all their school subjects in their native language for three to seven years while having the English language introduced gradually” (Porter, 1997, p. 1). This slow introduction to English was meant to allow a smooth transition for students to a new language, while keeping them from falling behind in history, science, mathematics, etc. TBE is idealized by proponents because it will supposedly circumvent stress that an immigrant student may experience if the culture of school is radically different from the culture at home (Rothstein, 1998, p. 8), among other reasons. A great deal of money is annually invested in these programs, so the effectiveness and efficiency of TBE programs are important to diagnose.

Critics of TBE are usually supporters of structured “immersion” programs like English as a Second Language (ESL). Through immersion, limited-English proficiency (LEP) students focus on intensive learning of English from day one. The premise is that immersing oneself in a new language is the fastest way to master it. When proficiency is achieved faster, students will do better in school sooner, resulting in higher immigrant graduation rates, higher college enrollment, better jobs, etc. TBE supporters insist that bilingual education is achieving those same improvements. As we will see, past studies have revealed mixed results. Currently, research is suggesting TBE and immersion both function equally well in bringing LEP children to proficiency in English. Studies are stressing that it is the quality of instruction that matters most.

A brief overview of the history of bilingual education and immersion programs may be an appropriate beginning. Historically, the children of immigrants to the United States have

consistently trailed behind native-born students. English-only programs were popular, though these were not the immersion programs we see today. Immigrant students faced the harsh reality of a “sink-or-swim English-only education” (Rothstein, p. 3). My own grandfather, the son of a Greek immigrant, failed out of kindergarten because he only spoke Greek. Students were thrown into classrooms without linguistic support, without structure, to “sink or swim.” Comparing the results of this primitive immersion system and those of immersion today will reveal stark differences. Immersion of the 19th and early 20th centuries obviously and understandably failed immigrant children.

Richard Rothstein, a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute, notes that in New York schools during the 1910s (a city and time period experiencing heavy immigration), “54% of native-born eight-graders made it to ninth grade, but only 34% of foreign-born eighth-graders did so” (p. 2). The trend of falling behind continued in high school (p. 2). Many immigrant students were labeled “retarded” because they failed to perform well on I.Q. Tests. Rothstein writes, “The federal immigration commission found that the retardation rate of children of non-English-speaking immigrants was about 60% higher than that of children of immigrants from English speaking countries” (p. 3). Clearly, this was not a matter of intelligence at all, but rather the failure of American schools to properly accommodate and assist LEP students for decades. Without proper teaching in English, immersion failed miserably, and it is a wonder some immigrant students were able to “swim” at all. Rothstein summarizes early immersion “programs” in this way: “Immersing immigrants in an English-language school program has been effective—usually by the third generation” (p. 3). In other words, slow and ineffective.

Indeed, it was not until 1974 that the Supreme Court guaranteed immigrant students the

support they required. “Prior to this time many students who came to school with little or no English language proficiency were simply told to learn English somewhere else and then come to school...offering bilingual education remained a voluntary local decision” (Fraser, 2010, p. 331). Then, after the frenzy of the civil rights movement, *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) changed things for the better. “Asking a student to sit in a classroom when the language of instruction simply made no sense was clearly discrimination...the basic principle that every student has a basic civil right to be taught in a language that makes sense was established by the Court” (Fraser, p. 331). LEP students were finally promised the support they needed to learn a English. The Court did not settle on a specific program to accomplish this, and thus the TBE-immersion battle raged on. The length of time it took for the United States to guarantee these rights to immigrant children is disheartening, but not unexpected considering our nation's track record on such matters. Until 1974, the unjust policy of “sink or swim” was alive and well in many parts of the country.

This overview of early immigrant integration is not to say that all schools were English-only. Some native-language-only schools were established, and many immigrants would opt out of school if they could not received instruction in their native tongue (Rothstein, p. 5). All the while, bilingual education schooling was developing. The first New York bilingual public school began in 1837; German immigrants' children learned school subjects in German and were introduced to limited English (Rothstein, p. 5). The author stresses that “nineteenth-century immigrant parents were often split over the desirability of bilingual education, as immigrant parents are split today. Many recognized that children were more likely to succeed if schools' use of the native language validated the culture of the home. But others felt that their children's education would be furthered if they learned in English only” (p. 4-5).

TBE programs existed across America, and at times increased or decreased in popularity,

usually determined by whether or not a war was being fought (German language schools during the world wars faced discrimination and cancellation) (Rothstein, p. 7). Rothstein gives an excellent summary of the controversies and opposing viewpoints when he writes:

To an unbiased layperson, the arguments of both advocates and opponents of bilingual education make sense. On the one hand, it's reasonable to insist that children who don't speak English continue their education in a language they understand in history, literature, math, and science, while they learn English. It's also reasonable to expect, however, that this might make it too tempting to defer English-language instruction. Moreover, the best way to do something difficult—e.g., making the transition to English—is simply to do it without delay. It makes sense to acknowledge that children may adapt better to school if the school's culture is not in conflict with that of the home (p. 8).

In 1998, Rothstein argued that the results of studies on the effectiveness of TBE were too mixed to completely do away with the programs (p. 10). Indeed, there were case studies in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Connecticut and elsewhere that revealed TBE led to better English acquisition and higher scores in school subjects. He reasons the mixed evidence is due to the fact that “whichever method is, in fact, more effective for most immigrant children, there will be many for whom the other method worked well” (p. 9). The previous year, Rosalie Porter, director of the Research in English Acquisition and Development Institute, presented the results of the case studies that supported immersion. A 1992 California study determined that “long stays in bilingual education programs in elementary schools delay the effective learning of the English-language literacy skills that are so important for secondary schoolwork” (Porter, 1997, p. 7). A 1994 New York study found “at all levels, students served in ESL only programs exited their programs faster than those served in bilingual programs” (p. 6). Furthermore, a 1995 study in El Paso schools concluded, “No evidence emerged, from students, parents, or teachers, that native-language teaching produces a higher level of self-esteem or that early immersion in a second language is more stressful, two of the common beliefs promoted by bilingual education

advocates” (p. 5). This evidence is impressive, but as Rothstein stated, there are multiple studies that would contradict these results.

Those studies are fifteen or twenty years old now, far out of date. An examination of current research is needed. A recent study was conducted which indicates TBE and immersion can be comparably effective. The study was conducted by the U.S. Department of Education and published in 2010. The abstract reads:

This paper reports the fifth-year results of a study comparing the English and Spanish language and reading performance of Spanish-dominant children randomly assigned beginning in kindergarten to Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) or Structured English Immersion (SEI). This is the first randomized study to compare TBE and SEI reading approaches over a period as long as five years....

Both groups gained substantially in English receptive language skills over the years. These findings suggest that Spanish-dominant students learn to read in English (as well as Spanish) equally well in TBE and SEI (Slavin, et al., p. 2).

When I first read Rothstein's work, I was critical that he refused to “pick a side.” The details of this study made me wonder if I had been too quick to judge him; perhaps he was being appropriately cautious and refused to jump to conclusions based on mixed evidence. In this study, the LEP students, in multiple schools across multiple states, began in kindergarten in immersion or TBE, and while immersion students did better in English *at first*, by 4th grade any advantage one program had over the other was moot. The findings “do not unequivocally support the positions of either side in the debate over bilingual education. Advocates of transitional bilingual education argue that native-language instruction in beginning reading should ultimately help Spanish-dominant children read better in English, but the data from this study do not find this to be true, at least by fourth grade” (p. 16). The report goes on to say, “Students in SEI had much higher scores on English reading than those in TBE in the early grades, but by fourth grade there were few significant differences in reading scores. Although the direction of the differences

avored the SEI group, the differences diminished each year, and by fifth or sixth grade it seems unlikely that there will be any differences at all” (p. 16). The study's reliability is strong due to its length and strict randomization. Its results are fascinating: the preference toward TBE or immersion will mean little by 4th grade. This contradicts studies that insist TBE in the early years will leave immigrant students handicapped for secondary school work. The idea that TBE takes so long it will negatively effect a student's performance in high school, his or her entrance to college, and his or her job suddenly sounds less plausible.

Slavin and his associates conclude by saying, “The findings of the present study reinforce the frequently stated conclusion that what matters most in the education of English language learners is the quality of instruction, not the language of instruction.... Schools may choose to teach English language learners in either their native language or in English for many reasons, including cultural, economic, or political rationales. Yet the claims that this choice is crucial for ultimate learning of English or Spanish reading are not supported by the data from this experiment” (p. 17). If this is correct, the entire bilingual education-immersion debate is pointless. Rothstein refused to call this one due to mixed evidence. A decade later, it is a “frequently stated” thought that differences in the programs, while they exist, are insignificant and, most importantly, inconsequential for immigrant students. More than any other factor, quality of instruction is key.

Other studies support Slavin's conclusion, which states, “The findings of this longitudinal, randomized evaluation of bilingual education agree with those of the only previous long-term evaluations of bilingual education, matched evaluations by Maldonado (1977) and Ramirez et al. (1991)” (p. 16) and mentions support from reports by “August & Shanahan, 2006” and “Cheung & Slavin, 2005” (p. 17).

August and Shanahan edited the National Literacy Panel's 2006 report, which states, "Becoming literate in a second language depends on the quality of teaching, which is a function of the content coverage, intensity or thoroughness of instruction, methods used to support the special language needs of second-language learners and to build on their strengths, how well learning is monitored, and teacher preparation" (p. 3). The panel also declared, "There is surprisingly little evidence for the impact of sociocultural variables on literacy achievement or development," with said factors being "immigration status; discourse/interactional characteristics; other sociocultural factors; parents and family influences; district, state, and federal policies; and language status or prestige" (p. 7). This report pushes previously held notions, misconceptions, and myths of the bilingual debate aside and focuses attention on the effectiveness of instruction.

Effective Reading Programs for English Language Learners and Other Language-Minority Students (2005), by Cheung and Slavin (being the same Robert E. Slavin from the aforementioned 2010 U.S. Department of Education study), does indeed support this new view of the debate:

For many years, the focus of policy debates relating to the reading education of English language learners (ELLs) has been on the question of language of instruction, contrasting bilingual and English-only approaches. As important as language of instruction is, however, there has been a growing recognition in recent years that *quality* of instruction is at least as important as *language* of instruction in the ultimate success of ELLs (p. 241).

The authors go on to say, "Quality of instruction is the product of many factors, including the quality of teachers, class size, and other resources" (p. 242).

It would seem Robert E. Slavin of John Hopkins University and the Center for Data-Driven Reform in Education has been a significant part of this reexamination of the TBE-

immersion battle. While we would not want to rely totally on evidence from a single researcher, Slavin points to other studies that agree with his position, such as “August & Hakuta, 1997; Brisk, 1998; Christian & Genesee, 2001; Goldenberg, 1996” (p. 241). We can rest assured that the evidence is building on multiple fronts that TBE and immersion are comparable in their effectiveness, if guided by quality methods and teachers of equal caliber. Slavin is just one of many voices.

In hindsight, the mixed evidence that Rothstein frowned upon makes perfect sense. If throughout decades of studies that yielded inconsistent results, a critical variable was being ignored or minimized in importance (the many-faceted quality of instruction), then the tests are unreliable. Mixed results are a natural and predictable outcome. Moreover, if Slavin is correct that the U.S. Department of Education's 2004-2009 study is the longest comparative research completed on this topic, and that the previous longest studies (Maldonado (1977) and Ramirez et al. (1991)) reached the same conclusions, it is logical to place more trust in them than in quicker studies of the past. It is clear that the best data now indicates TBE and immersion work equally well under quality instruction. Unfortunately, these findings mean that the solution to the problem is not so easily fixed as simply replacing TBE with immersion programs. Focus must shift to keeping classes small, allocating adequate funding and materials to all programs, finding the best candidates for new teachers, and providing teachers with the best possible quality of training, so they can provide the best possible instruction to LEP students.

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