



Bilingualism

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Background

At the beginning of the twenty-first century there were some three million children in the United States who were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). For much of the twentieth century these students would have been placed in so-called "immersion programs," in which they would be taught solely in English until they understood it as well or better than their native tongue. Beginning in the 1960s there was a gradual shift toward bilingual education, in which students can master English while retaining their native-language skills.

Types of Bilingual Education

There is a difference between bilingual programs and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, although bilingual programs include an ESL component. Bilingual programs are designed to introduce students to English gradually by working with them in both English and their native tongue. The students are able to master English without losing proficiency in the native language. In bilingual or dual language immersion, the class typically includes English speaking students and LEP students who share the same native language. Instruction is given in both English and the native language. In developmental or late-exit programs, all students share the same language; instruction begins in that language but gradually shifts to English as the students become more proficient.

Transitional or early-exit programs are similar to developmental programs, except that the goal is mastery of English rather than bilingualism. Students who become proficient in English are transferred to English-only classes.

Bilingualism is not generally a goal in ESL programs. In *sheltered English or structured immersion programs*, LEP students are taught in English (supplemented by gestures and other visual aids). The goal is acquisition of English. *Pull-out ESL programs* include English-only instruction, but LEP participants are "pulled out" of the classroom for part of the day for lessons in their native tongue.

Conflicting Philosophies

Bilingual education in the United States is a complex cultural issue because of two conflicting philosophies. On the one hand is the idea that the United States welcomes people from all societies, from all walks of life. Immigrants have long seen the States as the "Land of Opportunity," in which individuals can rise to the top through hard work and determination. They can build new identities for themselves, but they can also hold on

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to their past culture without fear of reprisal. At the same time, the United States is also the great "melting pot" in which immigrants are expected to assimilate if they wish to avail themselves of the many opportunities for freedom and success. Everyone who comes to the States, so they are told, should want to *become* American.

Thus there are people who believe strongly that erasing an immigrant's native tongue is erasing a key cultural element. People are entitled to speak and use their native languages as they please; anything less goes against the freedom for which the United States stands. Besides, having proficiency or fluency in more than one language is a decided advantage in a world that has become more interdependent.

There are other people who believe, equally strongly, that everyone who lives and works in the United States should speak, read, and write in English. Those who oppose bilingual programs for LEP students believe that allowing children to learn in their native tongue puts them at a disadvantage in a country in which English is the common language. A student whose instruction is in another language, they say, may never master English. This closes doors to opportunities including higher education and choice of career.

There is no uniform opinion even among immigrant parents of LEP children. Some parents want their children to be taught in their native tongue as a means of preserving their culture. Others, wishing their children to have the same opportunities as native speakers of English, want their children to be taught in English from the outset.

The one point on which everyone seems to agree is that LEP children deserve the best educational opportunities available, and any language program must be structured enough to give them a good foundation, while it remains flexible enough to meet their varied needs.

Historical Perspective

Although we tend to think of bilingualism in the United States as a modern issue, in fact it has always been a part of our history. In the early days of exploration and colonization, French, Spanish, Dutch, and German were as common as English. By 1664, the year that the British took control of New York from the Dutch, there were some 18 languages (not including the native American tongues) spoken in lower Manhattan alone. No doubt many of the inhabitants of the colony were conversant in more than two languages.

German and French remained common in colonial North America. Many Germans educated their children in German-language schools. Although many colonial leaders (among them Benjamin Franklin) complained about bilingualism, it was generally accepted. In fact, during and after the American Revolution, such documents as the ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION were published in both English and German.

During the nineteenth century millions of immigrants came to the United States and brought their languages with them. German remained popular, as did other European tongues. Spanish was introduced when the United States took possession of Texas, Florida, and California from Spain.

The enormous wave of [IMMIGRATION](#) that began in the 1880s and lasted until the early 1920s brought a change in sentiment toward bilingual education. The goals of voluntary assimilation were gradually replaced by strident calls for "Americanization." In Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines (which the United States had acquired after the Spanish-American War in 1898), English was to be the language of instruction even though most of these new Americans spoke no English at all. In 1906, Congress passed a law, the first language law ever passed, requiring naturalized citizens to be able to speak English. Anti-bilingual sentiment got stronger as more immigrants poured into the United States. Anti-German sentiment, which reached its peak when the United States entered World War I in 1917, caused some communities to ban the use of

German in public.

By the end of the war, bilingualism had fallen out of favor even in areas where it had thrived. In 1924 strict immigration quotas sharply reduced the number of new foreigners coming into the United States. For almost the next 40 years, bilingual education in U. S. schools was almost exclusively based on variations of immersion; students were taught in English no matter what their native tongue was, and those who did not master English were required to stay back in the same grade until they became proficient.

Landmark Legislation

Setting the Stage

Bilingual education in the United States was pushed back into the spotlight as a direct result of the 1959 revolution in Cuba. After Fidel Castro over-threw the dictatorship and established a Communist government, many middle- and upper-class Cubans fled to the United States. A large number of these refugees settled in Florida. Well-educated but with little in the way of resources, they were assisted quite generously by the federal and state governments.

Among this assistance was ESL instruction, provided by the Dade County (Florida) Public Schools. In addition, the school district launched a "Spanish for Spanish Speakers" program. In 1963, a bilingual education program was introduced at the Coral Way Elementary School in Miami. Directed by both U. S. and Cuban educators, the program began in the first through third grades. U. S. and Cuban students received a half day of English and a half day of Spanish instruction; at lunch time and recess and during music and art classes the groups were mixed together. Within three years the district was able to report benefits for both groups of students, who were now not only bilingual but also bicultural. This was no accident: the goal of the Coral Way initiative was to promote exactly this level of fluency.

The Civil Rights Act (1964)

The CIVIL RIGHTS Act of 1964 did not address bilingual education directly, but it opened an important door. Title VI of the Act specifically prohibits [DISCRIMINATION](#) on the basis of race, color, or national origin in any programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. What this means, among other aspects, is that school districts that receive federal aid are required to ensure that minority students are getting the same access to programs as nonminorities. This minority group includes language minority (LM) students, defined as students who live in a home in which a language other than English is spoken. (Although some LM students are fluent in English, many are classified as LEP.) Title VI's critical role in bilingualism would be made clear a decade later in the *Lau v. Nichols* case.

Bilingual Education Act (1968)

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968 was another important step for bilingual education. In particular, Title VII of that act, known as the Bilingual Education Act, established federal policy for bilingual education. Citing its recognition of "the special educational needs of the large numbers children of limited English-speaking ability in the United States," the Act stipulated that the federal government would provide financial assistance for innovative bilingual programs. Funding would be provided for the development of such programs and for implementation, staffing and staff training, and long-term program maintenance.

Title VII has been amended several times since its establishment, and it was reauthorized in 1994 as part of the Improving America's Schools Act. The basic goal has remained the same: access to bilingual programs for

children of limited means.

Lau v. Nichols

Probably the most important legal event for bilingual education was the *Lau v. Nichols* case, which was brought against the San Francisco Unified School District by the parents of nearly 1,800 Chinese students. It began as a discrimination case in 1970 when a poverty lawyer decided to represent a Chinese student who was failing in school because he could not understand the lessons and was given no special assistance. The school district countered that its policies were not discriminatory because it offered the same instruction to all students regardless of national origin. The lack of English proficiency was not the district's fault.

Lower courts ruled in favor of the San Francisco schools, but in 1974 the U. S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of the plaintiffs. In his opinion, Justice William O. Douglas stated simply that "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." The Court cited Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, noting that the students in question fall into the protected category established therein.

What *Lau v. Nichols* did not do was establish a specific bilingual policy. Individual school districts were responsible for taking "affirmative steps" toward reaching the goal of providing equal educational opportunities for all students.

State and Local Initiatives

In the 1960s there were no state bilingual programs; many states actually had English-only instruction laws on their books. After the Civil Rights Act and the Bilingual Education Act, states began to take more initiative. In 1971, Massachusetts became the first state to establish a bilingual mandate. Under this mandate, any school that had 20 or more students of the same language background was required to implement some sort of bilingual program.

A decade later, 11 more states had passed bilingual education laws, and an additional 19 offered some sort of legislative efforts in that direction. Today, bilingual or ESL education is offered in some form by every state. Not surprisingly, those states with the highest concentration of immigrants (New York, California, Texas, Florida) tend to have the most comprehensive programs. In fact, according to the most recent data from the National Clearing-house for Bilingual Education (NCBE), 18 of the 20 urban school districts with the highest LEP enrollment are in one of these four states. Some states fund all bilingual education programs; others fund only bilingual or only ESL programs.

It should be noted that bilingual needs can differ widely from state to state or district to district. According to the U. S. Department of Education, Spanish-speaking students make up nearly three-quarters of all LEP students in the United States. But in a district in which the predominant foreign language is Chinese, Vietnamese, or Hindi, the needs would of course be geared toward those languages. Local schools can create effective bilingual programs based on their specific needs. At the William Barton Rogers School in Boston, for example, a transitional program for middle-school LEP students who speak Vietnamese has met with success; likewise, a program for elementary school students in the Madawaska School District in Maine has been successful with French-speaking students.

Because each state's needs are different, and because those needs are subject to change, the best way to get comprehensive and up-to-date information on each state's initiatives is to contact individual state education

departments (see below).

Grants and Programs

Obtaining information about bilingual grants, programs, and other initiatives is much easier today than it was in the past thanks to the Internet. Federal, state, and local government agencies offer a surprising variety of information on their web sites. Those who do not own a computer can access these sites at any local public library. Following is a sampling of what is available.

The U. S. Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) is in charge of awarding Title VII grants to both state and local education agencies. There are 12 types of discretionary grants, which cover training, development, implementation, school reform programs, and foreign language instruction. These grants are awarded only to "education-related organizations." Individuals are not eligible for Title VII grants. Those interested in applying for a Title VII grant can obtain the necessary information by visiting OBEMLA's web site (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OBEMLA>)

A good beginning resource for anyone who wishes to find out about programs, grants, and other information on bilingual education and bilingual initiatives is the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE). Funded by OBEMLA, this organization collects and analyzes information and also provides links to other organizations. The NCBE web site (<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu>) is a comprehensive starting point.

Each state's Department of Education provides information on its statewide and local bilingual initiatives; the easiest way to find this information is to visit individual state education department web sites. Also, large cities such as New York, Miami, Houston, Los Angeles, and San Francisco provide information on their web sites about their comprehensive bilingual programs.

Additional Resources

Bilingual Education: A Sourcebook. Alba M. Ambert and Sarah E. Melendez, Garland Publishing, 1985.

Bilingual Education: History, Politics, Theory, and Practice. Third Edition. James Crawford, Bilingual Educational Services, Inc., 1995.

Bilingual Education: Issues and Strategies. Amado M. Padilla, Halford M. Fairchild, and Concepcion M. Valadez, editors, Sage Publications, 1990.

Learning in Two Languages: From Conflict to Consensus in the Reorganization of Schools. Gary Imhoff, editor, Transaction Publishers, 1990.

Organizations

Center for Applied Linguistics
4646 40th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20016 USA
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Fax: (202) 362-3740
URL: <http://www.cal.org>
Primary Contact: Donna Christian, President

National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE)

1220 L Street, NW, Suite 605
Washington, DC 20005 USA
Phone: (202) 898-1829
Fax: (202) 789-2866
URL: <http://www.nabe.org>
Primary Contact: Delia Pompa, Executive Director

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE)

The George Washington University
Center for the Study of Language and Education
2121 K Street, Suite 260
Washington, DC 20037 USA
Phone: (202) 467-0867
Fax: (800) 531-9347
URL: <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu>
Primary Contact: Minerva Gorena, Director

National Education Association (NEA)

1201 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036 USA
Phone: (202) 833-4000
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URL: <http://www.nea.org>
Primary Contact: Robert F. Chase, President

National Multicultural Institute (NMCI)

3000 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 438
Washington, DC 20008 USA
Phone: (202) 483-0700
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URL: <http://www.nmci.org>
Primary Contact: Elizabeth Pathy Salett, President

Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA)

400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202 USA
Phone: (202) 205-5463
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Primary Contact: Art Love, Acting Director

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)

700 South Washington Street, Suite 200
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA
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