

Let's Tell the Public the Truth about Bilingual Education

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Abstract

Despite strong empirical support, a reasonable rationale, and mildly positive public opinion, bilingual education was dismantled in three states. There is little evidence that xenophobic attitudes were to blame. Rather, the voting public was ignorant of the nature and effectiveness of bilingual education, and the profession made no organized effort to inform the public about bilingual education or to respond to attacks during the campaigns. This has resulted in more negative views of bilingual education. The cure is better communication with the public, more focused research efforts, and continued improvement of existing programs.

"In the intellectual battle over bilingual education, the campaigns opposing Ron Unz surrendered without firing a shot" (Crawford, 2003).

Bilingual education has been dismantled in three states, and is slowly dissolving in several others. This is a major attack: The three states that passed anti-bilingual education initiatives enroll 43% of the English language learners in the United States (Crawford, 2003).

This should never have happened. The case for bilingual education is very strong, but somehow this information has never reached the public. I will briefly review the strong case for bilingual education, discuss what went wrong, and suggest what could be done about this in the future. I will suggest that the cure is better public relations (but not necessarily from public relations professionals), and even better programs.

The Strong Case for Bilingual Education

Bilingual education has two independent goals, and both are worthy, but they are independent. One goal I term English, and by this I mean what Jim Cummins means, academic English, the language of school, coupled with academic success. A second goal can be termed the Heritage Language goal, the maintenance and

development of the heritage language and an appreciation of the heritage culture.

The Research is Impressive

In terms of the first goal, English, bilingual education has done well. The research is consistent: students in bilingual programs typically do at least as well on tests of English reading as comparison students in all-English programs, and often do better (for reviews, see Willig, 1985; Greene, 1997; for a current exemplary study, see Oller & Eilers, 2002).

The Two Pillars of Bilingual Education

There are two ways bilingual education helps English language develop and contributes to academic success, two pillars of bilingual education. The first ("background knowledge") is the fact that when students have a good education in their first language, they get background knowledge, and this knowledge helps make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. The second ("literacy transfers") is that developing literacy in the first language is a short cut to developing literacy in the second language. These two pillars are consistent with a number of psycholinguistic research findings, which I discuss in detail elsewhere (Krashen, 1996).

The Pillars Make Sense

A series of studies by Fay Shin and associates has shown that the two pillars appear to be reasonable to many people (see Shin, 2000; Krashen, 2003a, for reviews). Shin asked various groups if they agreed that having background knowledge makes subject matter in another language more comprehensible and whether they felt that those who were literate in one language had an easier time developing literacy in a second language. There was widespread agreement, with some "don't know" responses and few disagreements. This was true of teachers, administrators, parents, graduate students (Lao, 2003), and student teachers in Spain (Ramos, 2003).

The Public was not Anti-Bilingual Education

Before 1998 and the anti-bilingual education initiatives, the public was not anti-bilingual education (for a review of poll results, see Krashen, 1996, 1999). I will mention only one poll here, because it is of special interest: The Los Angeles Times (April 13, 1998) reported that only 1/3 of those polled preferred English-only; 2/3 approved either of use of the first language with no constraints (25%) or approved of short-term use of the first language (39%). The Dallas Morning News did a similar poll with nearly identical results.

Summary

Let us summarize: The research supports bilingual education, the underlying principles are consistent with other research results, many people find the underlying principles reasonable, and public opinion was, at least at one time, mildly favorable to bilingual education. So why did bilingual education lose in three states, with all this going for it?

Why We Lost: Not Xenophobia

There is no doubt that some people oppose bilingual education because of xenophobic, anti-immigrant attitudes. But there is no evidence that this was a deciding factor in the recent elections. Huddy and Sears (1990) reported that in their study, anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes accounted for less than 26% of the variance in attitudes toward bilingual education.

Even more convincing is the fact that according to polls, attitudes toward bilingual education were once fairly positive and have shifted. As noted above, in polls done before the Unz initiatives, the public was at least moderately in favor of the use of the first language in school. That is no longer so. In my view, we have lost the middle third in the last few years: Now about 2/3 favor English-only (Krashen, 2002). The middle third did not become xenophobes so rapidly. The reasonable conclusion is that most people are not xenophobes and sincerely want all children to succeed.

Why We Lost: Ignorance

I think that the problem is ignorance, not racism. Consider this astounding fact: Some of the same people who approved of the use of the first language in school also supported anti-bilingual education initiatives. The same LA Times poll in which 2/3 supported at least some use of the first language also showed approximately 2/3 support for Prop. 227. Amazingly, the Times did not notice the contradiction.

The LA Times website had data that helps us understand this strange result: They asked those who said they would support Prop. 227 why they would do so: 63%

said it was because of the importance of English. Only 9% said it was because they felt bilingual education was not effective and only 6% said it was because they preferred immersion. In other words, supporters of Proposition 227 thought they were supporting English.

My view is that most people have no idea of what bilingual education is. They don't know that bilingual education is based on the principles they would find reasonable. They don't know that bilingual education has been successful in helping children acquire English. In fact, I suspect many do not know that bilingual education even has English as a central goal. Tragically, the profession has not tried very hard to inform them.

The Frustration of Dealing with the Media

One reason not to try, of course, is the well-known difficulty of dealing with the press. While there are some very competent and patient reporters, many are neither. But bilingual educators must keep trying. Yes, it is frustrating to be ignored or misquoted, but if supporters of bilingual education continue to say nothing they will certainly be continued to be ignored and not quoted at all.

There is good evidence that information makes a difference: A. Garcia (2001) found that parents who applied for waivers for their children after 227 were significantly better informed about program options and language acquisition than those who did not.

Aim At the Core

When supporters of bilingual education communicate with the public, I think it is important to focus on the core message: What bilingual education is, how it works, and how successful it is. Only a few important links need to be made: The public is already sympathetic to the underlying principles, as Shin and others have noted.

The Unz campaigns were a wonderful chance to do this, a potential platform to explain bilingual education, but supporters blew their big chance. The anti-Unz initiative organizations aimed at the periphery and not the core, with disastrous results. In the campaigns, the focus was only on issues such as not suing teachers and allowing only one year of special help, while actually refusing to discuss bilingual education itself.

Such a strategy, even if it had helped turn back the initiatives, puts bilingual education in long-term danger: At a minimum, we failed to educate the public about bilingual education, which gives us less protection against the next attack. Even worse, it is an implicit concession that we do not believe in bilingual education. Unz quickly discovered that opponents of Prop. 227 in California were refusing to defend bilingual education in California (this advice was even posted on the No on 227 website) and took advantage of it, pointing out that even the professional bilingual education organizations would not defend bilingual education. All Unz and his allies have to do now is propose anti-bilingual initiatives that do not impose a one year limit on special help and do not sue teachers. Bilingual education would be defenseless.

This is not to say that these issues should be ignored. What I am saying is that we must emphasize the core.

The official advocacy groups were persuaded to follow this path because of advice from professional PR firms, advisors who told them that the public would never understand our abstract, intellectual arguments. But polls showed modest support for bilingual education already, and the Shin studies showed that many people understood the underlying principles. All that needed to be done was make the missing connections: Bilingual education is based on these reasonable principles, and the research supports it. Instead, the advocacy groups didn't try. The campaigns lost, as Crawford (2003) has pointed out, without firing a shot.

We should also bear in mind the possibility that some PR firms are interested in only the short-term, in winning the one campaign they are hired to help win, and do not consider the potential long-term damage their tactics might cause.

The failure to explain bilingual education and the failure to respond to attacks on bilingual education has, undoubtedly, been the cause of the decline in attitudes. Unz' mantra of failed programs became received wisdom.

The Skyrocket Myth

The situation was not helped at all when California test scores appeared to rise after 227 was passed, an event that was publicized by the NY Times ("test scores skyrocket") and carried in stories throughout the US (Thompson, DiCerbo, Mahoney, & MacSwan, 2002). Once again, the facts were on the side of bilingual education, and the explanation was not too complex. Test scores rose for several reasons that had nothing to do with the dismantling of bilingual education or

improved learning in general: A new test, the SAT9, was introduced at the same time Proposition 227 was passed. The first time a new test is given, scores seem low, but in the following years, as students and teachers become more familiar with the test, scores rise until the test needs to be recalibrated (Linn, Graue, & Sanders, 1990). SAT9 scores for 1998 were interpreted as a measure of the effectiveness of bilingual education. The normal increase one sees with subsequent administrations of the test was misinterpreted as evidence that 227 was working.

Test inflation was especially pronounced in California because there was very strong pressure to raise test scores, including bribes (cash rewards) and punishments (threats of being closed down). This encouraged what must be considered bogus means of raising test scores (certain kinds of test preparation, selective testing).

In addition, there was no evidence that schools that dumped bilingual education showed higher gains. A study by WestEd (Parrish, Linqanti, Merickel, Quick, Laird, & Esra, 2002) in fact, showed no difference in improvement in English reading for English learners between grades two and five between schools that kept and schools that dropped bilingual education. But once again, this information did not penetrate the public consciousness, nor was there any organized effort to get the word out.

Another Error

Before turning to possible strategies, I need to point out one more error: Campaigners for bilingual education consistently confused the two goals of bilingual education. Advocates pointed out the advantages of being bilingual and understanding one's heritage ("two languages are better than one"), and sometimes insisted that everybody in the United States should be bilingual. The public interpreted this as enforced bilingualism for English-speakers, and was wondering when language minority children were going to learn English.

What to do? Explain Bilingual Education

There are several possible paths, and we can easily take all of them.

Better Communication with the Public

Clearly bilingual educators must make greater efforts to communicate with the media and the public in general, to use both traditional means (e.g. letters to the editor, magazine articles) and more recent, innovative means (the internet).

Reporters generally contact official organizations for comments on issues; it is crucial that professional organizations be ready with clear and concise answers to frequently asked questions, and that they respond to all attacks on bilingual education. Failure to answer an attack is perceived as conceding the point. When advocates do answer, they can use the space provided as another opportunity to educate the public, whenever possible repeating the core arguments: Bilingual education is successful in helping children acquire English, and there are good reasons why it is successful.

Focused Efforts from the Academic Community

The professional organizations cannot do this alone. They need more help from the only segment of the population that has the time and expertise to deal with some of the issues in detail: University-level researchers.

Bilingual education is now in a state of all-out war, one we are losing. Researchers can no longer devote their time to peripheral issues and academic subtleties. They must focus their energies and abilities to studying the impact of bilingual education, studying different models and innovations, and responding to attacks with empirical evidence. Each attack is a research opportunity, an opportunity to see if in fact the bilingual education approach has been deficient, and to extend our knowledge. Is it true that bilingual education causes dropouts? Is it true that children "languish" in bilingual programs for years? Is it true that current immersion programs are getting better results than bilingual education? The studies and analyses need to be done, and need to be reported in clear and concise language. Opponents of bilingual education have kept up a steady stream of attacks; researchers should regard these as research opportunities. (Note that I am not recommending that researchers simply become a cheering section for bilingual education. As Jim Crawford has noted (personal communication), bilingual education supporters need to apply the same high level of scrutiny to apparently positive results for bilingual education as they apply to what appear to be negative results.)

Improve Existing Programs

A third path is probably the most effective of all: Currently existing bilingual programs need to be made so good that there is no doubt. As noted earlier, bilingual education has done well, but, like most things, it can improve. Moreover, simply showing that bilingual education is as good or better than alternatives may satisfy the academic community, but it will not satisfy a critical public who has been

convinced that it is a failure. The absolute achievement of students in bilingual education must be higher.

There is an easy way to do this: Improve the print-environment. Research supports the common-sense view that children with more access to print read more, and it also supports the common-sense view that children who read more read better (e.g. Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1998). Thus, improved access to books means improved reading, a conclusion consistent with research on the positive impact of school libraries (Lance, 1994; 2001; McQuillan, 1998).

It is also very well established that children from low-income backgrounds have little access to books: they live in communities with inferior public libraries, few bookstores, come from homes with few books, and attend schools with inferior school libraries (Smith, Constantino & Krashen, 1997; DiLoreto & Tse, 1999; Neuman & Celano, 2001).

A large percentage of children in bilingual education come from low-income families. A true book flood in the form of vastly improved school and classroom libraries would have a dramatic effect.

I suggest a three-step plan (see Krashen, 2003b):

- (1) Early reading in the first language, which provides a short cut to English reading. Of course, many programs are doing this already, but they are hampered by the fact that books in the primary language are not plentiful (Pucci, 1994). This needs to change.
- (2) Something we are not emphasizing: Massive recreational reading in both languages as soon as students can read independently, as soon as they reach the "Goosebumps Threshold." This will provide a huge boost in test scores; it is test preparation the legitimate way.
- (3) Continued reading in the heritage language, to insure continued growth in the heritage language and the lasting benefits of true bilingualism (Tse, 2001).

Thanks to the anti-bilingual education initiatives, however, this path is harder to take. In California, access to books in Spanish in communities where English learners live has been reduced (Pucci & Ulanoff, 2004), and despite lip-service on the importance of libraries (e.g. the Laura Bush Foundation) library funding has not improved. In California, in fact, the state with the lowest reading scores, library funding has dropped from insufficient to absolutely dismal. In 1992, California's fourth graders ranked last in the US in reading. At that time, California was spending half of what other states spent on school libraries. Today, in 2004,

California is still ranked last among the states in the US, despite the huge push for increased skills in language arts classes. And next year California is planning to spend only 3% of the national average on school libraries, ignoring the considerable research showing that better school libraries are related to higher reading scores.

Suggestions

Here are my "radical" suggestions:

1. A vigorous attempt to explain bilingual education to the public, why it works to help children acquire English as well as the fact that it works. In other words, let's tell the public the truth about bilingual education.
2. University-level researchers and scholars devote their efforts to core issues in bilingual education.
3. Improved school libraries, providing more to read in both languages. This will result in more recreational reading and more language acquisition and literacy development, and even better results from our bilingual programs.

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