Building a Bridge between Languages:

A Case for Bilingual Education

Dickinson College
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Introduction:

This research project sets out to explore the extent to which bilingual education in the United States is an effective strategy for instructing English language learners and fostering proficiency and fluency. Because I am deeply interested in language, I felt compelled to learn more about the pedagogy of language instruction and bilingual education in particular. I believe that language is the basis of any education because if we could not communicate with each other, we would not be able to teach more valued content like math or science. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of language education in the United States, I began this project with the intent to learn the most successful strategies and programs for teaching language. I began with researching the history of bilingual education, starting from the start of the 20th century spanning to the year 2001, in the wake of No Child Left Behind. The purpose of this was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the political forces surrounding the issue. From there, I interviewed a classmate, who had attended a bilingual school for five years in New York City, in order to discover the more personal and human perspective of bilingual education. Then, I created a photo story that corresponded to a voice recording of the interview, in order to truly hear and give her story a voice that cannot be replicated on paper. Finally, I compiled my research to complete a synthesis essay that argues for the effectiveness of bilingual education programs due to comprehensive evidence that suggests that the native language and learned language are mutually interdependent. After completing this research, I have come to the conclusion that bilingual education fosters not only a higher degree of fluency in both the first and second language, but also fosters security, respect, and positive emotional stability for English language learners.
Genre 1: Timeline

Endnote:

I decided to make a timeline of the history of bilingual education in the United States because I felt it would illuminate the political forces that played and still play a vital role in the fate of English language learners. The timeline provided vital background information in understanding the development of bilingual education and the key actors of the movement. In doing this research, I found that there are two warring parties, the proponents of English-Only education, and proponents of a multicultural education mission. Each event on the timeline had direct and indirect impact on the success and failures of the implementation of bilingual education. Furthermore, the timeline gave the appropriate context needed to understand future components of the project.

Citations:


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Genre 2: Digital Story

Endnote:

I decided to create an iMovie photo-story that incorporated my interview with a classmate and various digital images in order to tell her story. She had so many important things to say that worked so well with the current controversies regarding education, and I felt that to actually hear her voice and her story while seeing pictures relating to the issues she discussed, rather than to just read it, would be much more powerful. It would not have been authentic to have only paraphrased her story. I wanted her to speak for herself. Furthermore, by digitally showing images of political cartoons and bilingual classrooms, the project brings her story to life. The combination of the audio of her voice and the images helps to illuminate the key components of her experience that speak to larger political issues.

Citations:

Images:

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Music:

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Genre 3: Interview

Date and Time of Interview: October 30th from 3pm-3:45pm

1. What languages do you speak fluently?

   I speak English and Spanish fluently.

2. What do you consider to be your native language and why?

   Spanish because it was the first language that I learned, and it was the language that I grew up with all of my life. When it comes to Spanish, and when I am home, that is the only language that I speak.

3. What language did your family speak in the home?

   Spanish

4. How many years were you enrolled in a bilingual education program?

   I spent five years in the bilingual program. I started at four years old in kindergarten and ended in fourth grade.

5. How old were you when you first entered the program?

   I was 4 years old. I entered kindergarten in the bilingual program.

6. How did you come to be in this bilingual program?

   My parents because my father has been in the U.S. longer than my mother. He knew friends around the neighborhood and my aunt has older sons that all went to the same school that I ended up going to. Through connections with friends and family, my parents found out about the school. After my mom came to the United States with my sister and I, we moved into an apartment right across the street from this school and that’s how we found the program.

7. Where did you go to school?

   I went to school in New York State, in New York City

8. How did the bilingual program work?

   I remember that each student had a primary teacher like an advisor who spoke Spanish only for the first year I was there. The first half of the day I spent with the Spanish teacher. After lunch, we switched to the English teacher who only spoke English to us. At the end of the day, we would return to the Spanish teacher for after school programs so
my parents could pick me up. I remember hating going to English class because it was so frustrating. I couldn’t learn the ABC’s because I knew the ABC’s in Spanish but I couldn’t separate the sounds between the languages. I related everything back to Spanish. The English teacher helped me out sometimes after school.

9. Was content like math and science taught in your first or second language?

It changed by grade level. In kindergarten, I learned history, literature, and math all in Spanish and then English was reading and writing. In 1st grade it changed. My main teacher became the English teacher I learned the 4 main subjects in 1st grade in English like history and science and math. Spanish became the “English” class because we learned about writing and reading. They wanted me to immerse myself completely into the English language but at the same time they wanted to make sure that I was still close to my roots and that I was still keeping myself fluent in Spanish as well.

10. Do you prefer one language to the other? If so, why?

No, I don’t prefer one to the other right now. I used to prefer Spanish. Then English in 4th grade, I was very used to English and all of my friends spoke English more than Spanish primarily so that was my way to socialize. However, all of my life I had to continuously took Spanish, which I hated, because I was learning with students who had never spoken the language. Because I took Spanish up through high school as the “language” class, because it was too easy and yet I didn’t get it. The grammar and rules, and testing were difficult because I didn’t know them. I could speak and understand. I only knew what sounded right so it made me not like Spanish. I hated being tested on those things. Then in junior year of H.S. when I took AP Spanish, I completely fell in love with reading Spanish literature, analyzing in Spanish and I realized that I do love both languages. I loved reading again in Spanish. It got me back on track with basically the love that I had for Spanish in school. I continue to take Spanish at Dickinson, like Cuban literature last semester. Right now, I don’t have a preference right now because now I use English for everything at school but when I go home I go right back to Spanish. I think it’s a nice combination right now.

11. Do you believe that you benefited from the bilingual program?

Yes, definitely. I had early exposure to the English language. Learning English, it didn’t feel rushed at all. I think it all depended on the environment too. Most of the teachers were Hispanic, and it was such a comfortable environment. I was able to relate to everyone there, so school felt like home. I was more willing to open up and be willing to learn how to speak. I felt that they were going at my pace especially because I was able to practice both. The teachers really understood my limits. For example, when I was getting really uncomfortable with English, they would bring me right back to Spanish. They created a good comfort zone for me. There was a good balance between the comfortable and uncomfortable. There wasn’t any pressure. I didn’t have any self-esteem issues or shame because of time pressure to learn English.
12. Did you find that your fluency in your first language affected the fluency in your second language?

*Oh, definitely. It goes both ways because I have trouble with separating the two languages. There are some things I can only say in English or only say in Spanish. It is a struggle, especially at Dickinson, to transition between the languages because at home I speak Spanish but because I have been speaking only English here I struggle.*

13. Do you think that students who do not speak English, as their first language would benefit from a bilingual program or an immersion program?

*For me, I think the bilingual program based on my experience. I’m going to reflect on my cousins’ experiences because they had a different experience. The bilingual program gave me confidence and it prepared me. Because of that I gained a sense of appreciation for school which affected my motivation and I was much more motivated in school. I felt very welcomed and comfortable, most of the time and therefore the fact that the entire faculty believed in me and they were understand and supportive of me. They understood what my pace between both languages was and didn’t push me too hard or too little. Because of that I learned to love school.*

*As opposed to my cousins who were in an immersion program, school was discouraging for them. This isn’t the case for all of my cousins, but most of them did not end up finishing high school or they never went to college after finishing. It made their motivation very low. There was a lot of bullying for them and it took away from their academic experience. And you know it was just very hard for students to be able to focus and be able to grow that same sense of appreciation from school as much as I did because they dreaded going to school They feared that they were going to be picked on or that they were not going to get the material on time because there was that time pressure to learn English as quickly as possible. They felt that if they didn’t get it now that it was hopeless.*

*So I just think that a bilingual program is so much better because everyone was on the page as me and I was able to relate with everyone. The teachers created such a better environment for me*
Endnote:

I chose to interview my classmate for a number of reasons. Because I lack personal experience with bilingual education, I wanted an authentic representation to be included in this project. I have only learned languages, Italian and French, as a second language in middle and high school, as well as at Dickinson College. Because of this, I wanted to have not only a genuine perspective on the issue, but a realistic representation of one of the many bilingual programs implemented throughout the country. My classmate’s experience was illuminating and informative, while also telling her inspiring and hopeful story.
Building a Bridge between Languages:

A Case for Bilingual Education

Since the end of the Civil Rights Movement, the topic of English language learners has seen much controversy. There are several different programs in place around the country, ranging from complete immersion into English to bilingual programs involving instructional attention to both languages. Contrary to popular belief, immersion education, because it does not develop a child’s first language, is not as effective in teaching English as a bilingual program is. Furthermore, several studies have observed that a child’s fluency in his or her first language can loosely predict future fluency in the second. Because bilingual education fosters fluency in both the first and second language, the programs keep students in touch with their native language while promoting language proficiency with less stress and pressure.

The history of bilingual education in the United States found its origins at the end of the Civil Rights Movement. Because of the increasing numbers of non-English-speaking immigrants in the country, the U.S. was forced to address the issue of educating the children of these immigrants. The first piece of major legislation, Title VII, the Bilingual Education Act, was passed in 1968. It acknowledged that there was a significant population of non-English-speaking students that had the right to an equal education. This included education in their native language and aid in teaching them English. This act, while a step in the right direction, did not actually do the work it could have done. It did not create any bilingual programs but rather allocated funds to give to schools that qualified. Prior to 1968, the law had been silent on the specific needs of limited-English speakers, and no federal categorical programs of bilingual-bicultural education existed (Petrzela, 2010, p. 412). Then, in 1974, the Supreme Court, in the Lau vs. Nichols case, made a monumental decision. It held that school programs conducted exclusively in English
denied equal access to education to students who spoke other languages, and that schools had the responsibility of helping these students overcome their language disadvantage, although the Court did not make bilingual education a requirement (Escamilla, 1989, p. 2).

Unfortunately, the victories from the 1960s through the early 1990s were not sustainable. With a resurgence of an English-Only sentiment, the United States entered a period of standardization and accountability that majorly set back the important achievements of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in California there were two major legislative propositions. In 1994, Proposition 187 was passed by Californian voters, and denied education rights to undocumented children as well as any other public service (Menchaca-Ochoa, 2006, p. 53). While many aspects of the legislation were proved illegal, the sentiment of the proposition lived on in California. Furthermore, with the passing of Proposition 227 in 1998, California approved the elimination of bilingual education in their state, which has made it difficult for school districts in California to offer bilingual education programs (Menchaca-Ochoa, 2006, p. 53). Then, in 2001, the Bush Administration passed No Child Left Behind into law. NCLB was a major set back for bilingual students because it neglected children's primary language, which the bilingual education movement worked to validate (Menchaca-Ochoa, 2006, p. 57). Through this explanation of the history of the bilingual education movement, one can see how politics and national attitudes towards non-English speaking populations influenced and continue to influence the success and support for bilingual programs.

Bilingual programs provide many benefits for English language learners. It is not difficult to find connections between different languages, and often the urge to draw these connections is engrained in our brains. In her article Linking to Prior Knowledge, Yu Ren Dong (2009) asserts that teachers can support language learners in all content areas by appealing to their prior knowledge and experiences that are “encoded in their native languages and acquired through
schooling in their native countries” (p. 28). Consequently, to access students’ prior knowledge, teachers must engage their native languages which act as the key to higher learning.

Furthermore, Dong (2009) argues, “the interdependence between the first and second languages facilitates rather than impedes students’ learning of English in general and of academic English in particular” (p. 28). The native and learned language, if engaged properly, can actually enhance language learning because, “our brain automatically searches for patterns or similarities between the new language and the native langue to help us understand the new concept or word” (Dong, 2009, p 28.). When strategies involving cognates and direct comparisons between concepts in each language are utilized, the teacher is appealing to students’ natural inclination to do this work. As a result, by developing both languages and showing that they are both relevant in the learning process, a student’s “learning becomes more comprehensible, meaningful, and exciting” (Dong, 2009, p. 31). Despite the fact that Dong is not specifically speaking to bilingual programs, these strategies can be utilized in any program and find success. These simple strategies can, however, be implemented on a larger scale in bilingual education.

While there has not been a consensus among researchers on whether the implementation of bilingual education is more effective than other methods, two studies in particular provide insight into this critical question. While many proponents of immersion education argue that immersion education benefits the development of functional proficiency in the second language at no expense to the learners’ first language, this first study shows that not developing a student’s first language leads to a deficit proficiency and development in both languages (Christian, Fortune, & Tedrick, 2011, p.5). Mila Schwartz and Yehudit Shaul (2012) set out to “extend our knowledge about the effects of bilingual preschool education by focusing on script schema development” (p. 37). Script schema development refers to the development of a child’s narrative ability, as in the ability to tell a story with a clear sequence of events. A script,
according to Schwartz and Shaul (2012) “is an ordered sequence of actions appropriate to a particular spatial-temporal context and organized around its specific goal” (p. 37). There has not been extensive research on script schema, but nevertheless it is a key stage in knowledge construction. The study focused on Russian and Hebrew-speaking immigrants in Israel, and compares the experiences of students in three groups, the control of Monolingual Hebrew-speaking students, and then bilingual students in an additive bilingual program (BBP) and bilingual students in a subtractive bilingual program (BMP). The results of the study revealed, “the lack of input in the children’s [native language] within the preschool curriculum and education environment appeared to hinder their script schema development in this language… subtractive bilingual education enhances bilingual development” (Schwartz and Shaul 2012). In other words, the bilingual students who were placed in a monolingual program saw a decrease in their script schema in their native language with a small increase in their script schema in Hebrew.

Conversely, the bilingual students in the bilingual program had “significant superiority in overlapping between L1 and L2… [Their] progress in L2 was interdependent with their progress in L1, which continued to be supported in the education setting” (Schwarz and Shaul 2012). In conclusion, the study revealed that the students who received instruction in both their first and second languages showed improvement in their script schema in both languages, and a greater increase in the second language than the students who only received instruction in the second language. This leads us to the conclusion that the first and second languages are interdependent. Fluency in the first language largely predicts the fluency in the second.

In another study, Romila Dominguez de Ramirez and Edward Shapiro (2007) explored the extent to which “oral reading fluency in a child’s first language (Spanish) as assessed by Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) was related to oral reading fluency in a second language
(English) and whether Spanish oral reading fluency probes administered in the fall were predictive of English oral reading fluency outcomes for spring of the same academic year” (p. 795). Underachievement of Latino students has been cited as a major problem of the education system; unfortunately “it is difficult to distinguish students who struggle in reading English because of second language acquisition versus those who struggle because of underlying learning disabilities” (Ramirez & Shapiro 2007). Because of this difficulty, teachers must be able to recognize how literacy in the first language might transfer over to the second, and “whether the interrelationships have positive or negative consequences for readers” (Ramirez & Shapiro 2007). While many educators and policy makers believe that the native language hinders fluency in the second language, this study (2007) found “that reading fluency was significantly related across languages, supporting the notion of mutual influence of first and second language” (p. 803). This mutual relationship can help educators realize that “proficiency in the native language [is] a valuable resource for learning English” (p. 802). Consequently, bilingual programs that support the fluency in both languages can strengthen this mutual relationship thereby increasing the proficiency in both languages.

Bilingual education has the potential to be exceptionally influential for English language learners. Beyond the statistics, methods, and theories, language is the basis of education. It connects us to one another, and to continue its legacy we must determine how we can best pass on the gift of language to future generations. Bilingual education not only benefits students on an academic level, but it also gives respect and legitimacy to languages other than English. Because it gives students emotional and academic support, bilingual education promotes fluency and proficiency without detriment to the student and his or her culture, language, and life.
Conclusion:

My initial interest in bilingual education stemmed from my innate curiosity for language. I want to be a French teacher one day, and I set off in pursuit of better understanding how languages are learned and what are the best strategies for promoting fluency and proficiency. Now that I have done this research, I have much insight into the successful strategies language teachers can implement in their classrooms, mainly through purposefully engaging with connections between the two languages. From my own personal experience, I have always loved finding the similarities and those subtle yet important differences between French and English, my two main languages. Learning that this desire is one built into our brains was something that made much sense to me. From the historical knowledge I gained from the timeline to the personal experience of my classmate, I was able to get a much more comprehensive view of bilingual education. At the end of the day, it is not the numbers or the studies that matter the most. What matters most is the student, their emotions and their experiences. Even if the numbers point to immersion, the student who feels shamed and discouraged in that program provides much more valuable insight into the conversation of language education. Of all of the facts and strategies I researched, the most significant to me was the idea of listening to the students and giving respect to their native languages. Immersion tends to erase the progress in the native language, while giving the impression that English is the superior and more important language. What I really love about bilingual education, which is supported by my research and my classmate’s experience, is that it works towards validating both languages, and showing the students that their language matters just as much, if not more, in the process of learning another language. These students and all of the prior knowledge and experience that comes with them matter. Bilingual education acknowledges and truly values the individual student.
References


