

## **Bilingual Education and English Immersion: The Ramírez Report in Theoretical Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The findings of the Ramírez Report indicate that Latino students who received sustained L1 instruction throughout elementary school have better academic prospects than those who received most or all of their instruction through English. This pattern of findings refutes the theoretical assumptions underlying opposition to bilingual education while supporting the theory underlying developmental and two-way bilingual programs.

### **Introduction**

On Monday February 11th 1991, the U.S. Department of Education released the findings of an eight-year study (Ramírez, Pasta, Yuen, Ramey & Billings, 1991) designed to provide definitive answers to one of the most volatile questions in American education: What types of programs work best in helping Latino students succeed in school? The issue has revolved around the effectiveness, of bilingual education which involves using the child's native language in addition to English as a language of instruction. The Ramírez report is a unique document in this debate which has gone on for more than 20 years in the United States. It is perhaps the only research report that both opponents and proponents of bilingual education accept as methodologically valid. Both opponents and advocates of bilingual education were involved in the design of the study. For example, the original project officer for the study within the Department of Education was Dr. Keith Baker, whose 1981 review of the literature (with Adriana de Kanter) claimed that transitional bilingual education was no more effective than all-English programs and who has long been a staunch advocate for "structured immersion" programs in which language-minority children are immersed in English. Thus, the findings of the report provide a rare opportunity for dialogue that is less clouded by partisan political positions than in the past.

I shall first review the opposing theoretical positions in the debate and then examine these positions in light of the findings of the Ramírez report.

### **Theory underlying opposition to bilingual education**

I am using the term “theory” in a somewhat loose sense to refer to sets of propositions with respect to minority students’ language learning and academic achievement that are in principle empirically testable. Three such propositions will be highlighted: (a) the claim that “time on task” is the major variable underlying language learning and hence immersion in English is the most effective means to ensure the learning of English; (b) the claim that under these conditions of immersion, language-minority students will quickly (within 1-2 years) pick up sufficient English to survive academically without further special support; (c) the claim that English immersion should start as early as possible in the student’s school career since younger children are better language learners than older children. Examples of each of these claims are presented below:

Rosalie Pedalino Porter (1990) clearly articulates the “time-on-task” principle in stating:

My personal experience and professional investigations together impel me to conclude that the two overriding conditions that promote the best learning of a second language are (1) starting at an early age, say at five, and (2) having as much exposure and carefully planned instruction in the language as possible. Effective time on task - the amount of time spent learning - is, as educators know, the single greatest predictor of educational achievement; this is at least as true, if not more so, for low-socioeconomic-level, limited-English students. Children learn what they are taught, and if they are taught mainly in Spanish for several years, their Spanish-language skills will be far better than their English language ones (pp. 63-64).

Gary Imhoff (1990) in outlining the U.S. English position on bilingual education suggests that while native language instruction might be acceptable “for the first few months” (p. 51), the educational rationale for bilingual education beyond this initial adjustment period is seriously deficient. Especially problematic is

the rejection by bilingual education advocates of the “time on task” principle:

Bilingual-education advocates also tend to dismiss the idea that practice makes perfect, expressed in educational terms as “time on task,” and hold instead that non-English-speaking students will learn English better if less time is spent teaching it (p. 51).

Nathan Glazer (Glazer & Cummins 1985) has articulated his position in regard to teaching methodology and length of time required to develop English proficiency in responding to questions posed by the editors of the journal *Equity and Choice*:

All our experience shows that the most extended and steady exposure to the spoken language is the best way of learning any language... . How long? It depends. But one year of intensive immersion seems to be enough to permit most children to transfer to English-language classes (p. 48).

Many other examples of these positions could be cited based on both academic and media commentary (see Cummins 1989). The opposition claims are in direct contrast to those made by academic advocates of bilingual education, as outlined below.

### **Theory proposed by bilingual education advocates**

It is important first to highlight the fact that most bilingual education theorists have distanced themselves from the popular conception of the rationale for bilingual programs, namely the “linguistic mismatch” hypothesis. This position suggests that a home-school language switch (or linguistic mismatch) will inevitably lead to academic difficulties since children cannot learn through a language they do not understand. While this claim has been persuasive to many policy-makers and educators (and, in fact, underlies the quick-exit transitional focus of most U.S. bilingual education), it is seriously flawed. It fails to account either for the success of English background children in Canadian French immersion or in U.S. two-way bilingual programs or the fact that under certain conditions language-minority students can succeed academically in English-only programs (see Cummins 1989). Academic advocates of bilingual education have consistently rejected

compensatory (or transitional) bilingual programs and argued for enrichment (or two-way) bilingual programs that promote biliteracy for both minority and majority language children (e.g. Fishman 1976; Lambert 1975; Swain 1979). Three central psychoeducational principles, supported by empirical research, underlie this emphasis on enrichment or late-exit bilingual education: (a) continued development of both languages enhances children's educational and cognitive development; (b) literacy-related abilities are interdependent across languages such that knowledge and skills acquired in one language are potentially available in the other; (c) while conversational abilities may be acquired fairly rapidly in a second language, upwards of five years are usually required for second language learners to attain grade norms in academically-related aspects of the second language. Together, these principles suggest that reinforcing children's conceptual base in their first language throughout elementary school (and beyond) will provide a foundation for long-term growth in English academic skills. The theory also suggests that we should not expect bilingual children to approach grade norms in English academic skills before the later grades of elementary school. Each of these sets of data is considered in more detail below.

**The Effects of bilingualism.** There is considerable evidence that the acquisition of two or more languages entails positive consequences for metalinguistic development (e.g. Bialystok 1991; Göncz & Kodzopel'ic' 1991; Ricciardelli 1989). It has also been reported that children who had acquired literacy in two languages performed significantly better in the acquisition of a third language than did children from monolingual backgrounds or those from bilingual backgrounds who had not acquired literacy in their home language (Swain & Lapkin 1991). These latter comparisons are particularly convincing in that the biliterate group had considerably lower socioeconomic status than the monolingual background group.

A large number of additional studies point in the direction of cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism, although caution must be exercised in making strong claims for bilingual advantages because of the difficulties of controlling background variables in some of the studies. What is clear, however, is that the development of home language literacy skills by bilingual students entails no negative consequences for their overall academic or

cognitive growth and, in some situations, there may be significant educational benefits for students in addition to the obvious personal benefits of bilingualism.

One obvious pedagogical and policy implication is that rather than attempting to eradicate children's bilingualism "in order to help them learn English," educators should encourage students to develop their linguistic talents and also provide parents with advice and resources (e.g. first language books) to enable them to promote the language of the home.

**The Relationship between first language (L1) and second language (L2).** There is considerable evidence of interdependence of literacy-related or academic skills across languages (see Cummins 1991 for a review) such that the better developed children's L1 conceptual foundation, the more likely they are to develop similarly high levels of conceptual abilities in their L2. The moderate to strong correlation between academic skills in L1 and L2 suggests that L1 and L2 abilities are manifestations of a common underlying proficiency. The interdependence of academic aspects of proficiency across languages has been used to interpret the fact that in bilingual programs, either for minority or majority students, instruction through a minority language results in no academic loss in the majority language. In fact, frequently for minority students an inverse relationship between amount of instruction in English and English academic achievement is observed (Cummins 1989).

The implication of these data is that bilingual programs that strongly promote minority students' L1 literacy skills are viable means to promote academic development in English. The positive results of programs that continue to promote literacy in L1 throughout elementary school can be attributed to the combined effects of reinforcing students' cultural identity and their conceptual growth as well as to the greater likelihood of parental involvement in such programs.

**The Acquisition of conversational and academic aspects of English proficiency.** Research studies by Collier (1987) and Cummins (1981) suggest that very different time periods are required for language-minority students to attain peer-appropriate levels in conversational skills in English as compared to academic skills. Specifically, while there will be major individual

differences (Wong Fillmore 1991), conversational skills often approach native-like levels within about two years of exposure to English whereas a period of four to nine years (Collier 1987, 1989) or five to seven years (Cummins 1981) of school exposure has been reported as necessary for ESL students to achieve as well as native speakers in academic aspects of English.

These trends have considerable relevance for a number of policy and pedagogical issues. For example, they suggest that exiting of children prematurely from bilingual programs may jeopardize their academic development, particularly if the mainstream classroom does not provide an environment that is supportive of language acquisition. It is also clear that psycho-educational assessment of bilingual students is likely to underestimate students' academic potential to a significant extent if any credence is placed in the test norms which are derived predominantly from native English-speaking students.

To what extent are the alternative positions on bilingual education consistent with the findings of the Ramírez Report? This question is addressed in the next section.

### **Consistency of alternative positions with the findings of the Ramírez report**

As elaborated elsewhere in this issue, the Ramírez study compared the academic progress of Latino elementary school children in three program types: (a) English "immersion", involving almost exclusive use of English throughout elementary school, (b) early-exit bilingual in which Spanish was used for about one-third of the time in kindergarten and first grade with a rapid phase-out thereafter, and (c) late-exit bilingual that used primarily Spanish instruction in kindergarten, with English used for about one-third of the time in grades 1 and 2, half the time in grade 3, and about sixty per cent of the time thereafter.

One of the three late-exit programs in the study (site G) was an exception to this pattern, in that students were abruptly transitioned into primarily English instruction at the end of grade 2. In other words, this "late-exit" program was similar in its implementation to early-exit. Students in the "immersion" and early-exit programs were followed from kindergarten through grade 3 while those in the late-exit program were followed in two cohorts (K-3 and 3-6).

It was possible to directly compare the progress of children in the English immersion and early-exit bilingual programs but only

indirect comparisons were possible between these programs and the late-exit program because these latter programs were offered in different districts and schools from the former. The comparison of immersion and early-exit programs showed that by grade 3 students were performing at comparable levels in English language and reading skills as well as in mathematics. Students in each of these program types progress academically at about the same rate as students in the general population but the gap between their performance and that of the general population remains large. In other words, they tend not to fall further behind academically between first and third grade but neither do they bridge the gap in any significant way. Contrary to the expectations of many policy-makers, students in the “immersion strategy” program did not exit the program more quickly than students in the early-exit program. This suggests that immersion strategy programs are likely to be comparable in cost to bilingual programs.

While these results do not demonstrate the superiority of early-exit bilingual over English immersion, they clearly do refute the argument that there is a direct relation between the amount of time spent through English instruction and academic development in English. If the “time-on-task” notion were valid, the early-exit bilingual students should have performed at a considerably lower level than the English immersion students, which they did not.

The “time-on-task” notion suffers even further indignity from the late-exit bilingual program results. In contrast to students in the immersion and early-exit programs, the late-exit students in the two sites that continued primary language instruction for at least 40 per cent of the time were catching up academically to students in the general population. This is despite the fact that these students received considerably less instruction in English than students in early-exit and immersion programs and proportionately more of their families came from the lowest income levels than was the case for students in the other two programs.

Differences were observed among the three late-exit sites with respect to mathematics, English language (i.e. skills such as punctuation, capitalization etc.) and English reading; specifically, according to the report:

As in mathematics and English language, it seems that those students in site E, who received the strongest opportunity to develop their primary language skills, realized a growth in

their English reading skills that was greater than that of the norming population used in this study. If sustained, in time these students would be expected to catch up and approximate the average achievement level of this norming population (Ramírez et al. 1991, p. 35).

By contrast, students in site G who were abruptly transitioned into almost all-English instruction in the early grades (in a similar fashion to early-exit students) seemed to lose ground in relation to the general population between grades 3 and 6 in mathematics, English language and reading.

The report concludes that:

Students who were provided with a substantial and consistent primary language development program learned mathematics, English language, and English reading skills as fast or faster than the norming population used in this study. As their growth in these academic skills is atypical of disadvantaged youth, it provides support for the efficacy of primary language development in facilitating the acquisition of English language skills (p. 36).

These findings are entirely consistent with the results of other enrichment and two-way bilingual programs and show clearly that there is no direct relationship between the instructional time spent through the medium of a majority language and academic achievement in that language. If anything, the bulk of the evidence suggests an inverse relation between exposure to English instruction and English achievement for Latino students in the United States.

These data directly refute the three theoretical positions upon which the opposition to bilingual education is based. First, if the "task" is conceived as exposure to English, then there is an inverse relation between "time on task" and English academic development; second, students immersed in English do not pick up sufficient English to transfer to a regular program any more rapidly than those in bilingual programs; and third, early intensive exposure to English appears to be less effective than a more gradual introduction to English academic skills while students' L1 conceptual base and cultural identity are being reinforced.

By contrast, the data are consistent with the theoretical positions advocated by supporters of enrichment bilingual education. First,



the emerging bilingualism and biliteracy of the late-exit students is clearly not impeding their English academic development in any way; on the contrary, since these students appear to have the best academic prospects in English there may be some enhancement of language processing abilities, as suggested in other research; second, operation of the interdependence or academic transfer principle is evident in the fact that less time through the medium of English appears to result in more academic prospects in English; and third, consistent with the data suggesting that upwards of five years is required for language-minority students to approach grade norms in English language arts, students in the late-exit bilingual programs only begin to close the gap between themselves and the norming group in the later grades of elementary school.

#### **Broader educational implications of the Ramírez report**

One disturbing aspect of the findings of the Ramírez report is that the classroom environment in all three program types reflects transmission models of pedagogy or what Paolo Freire (1983) has called a “banking education.” As expressed in the report:

Of major concern is that in over half of the interactions that teachers have with students, students do not produce any language as they are only listening or responding with non-verbal gestures or actions. ... Of equal concern is that when students do respond, typically they provide only simple information recall statements. Rather than being provided with the opportunity to generate original statements, students are asked to provide simple discrete close-ended or patterned (i.e. expected) responses. This pattern of teacher/student interaction not only limits a student’s opportunity to create and manipulate language freely, but also limits the student’s ability to engage in more complex learning (i.e., higher order thinking skills). In sum... teachers in all three programs offer a passive language learning environment, limiting student opportunities to produce language and develop more complex language and thinking skills (1991, p. 8).

The predominance of transmission models of pedagogy is not surprising in view of the fact that other large-scale studies of American education have documented the same phenomenon (Goodlad 1984; Sirotnik 1983). However, there are additional

unfortunate implications of transmission models for language-minority students since the curriculum will typically reflect the values and priorities of the dominant group and effectively suppress the experiences and perspectives of minority groups. Thus, in comparison to interactive/experiential/critical orientations to pedagogy (Cummins 1989), there are few opportunities to validate and amplify student or community voice. In other words, while the late-exit programs documented in the Ramírez Report appear to create conditions for student empowerment with respect to cultural and linguistic incorporation and parental involvement, their pedagogical orientation severely restricts the possibilities for student empowerment (see Cummins 1989, for discussion of "empowerment" in relation to the education of language—minority students).

The content of instruction and the focus of language interaction in the classroom always reflect the ways in which educators have defined their roles in relation to minority students and communities and their vision of societal realities and goals. For example, it has been argued by many theorists that the vision of our future society implied by the dominant transmission models of pedagogy is a society of compliant consumers who passively accept rather than critically analyze the forces that impinge on their lives. Thus, Sirotnik (1983), on the basis of the data from Goodlad's (1984) major study of American classrooms, points to the hidden curriculum being communicated to students in the typical classroom; this classroom contains

A lot of teacher talk and a lot of student listening... almost invariably closed and factual questions... and predominantly total class instructional configurations around traditional activities — all in a virtually affectless environment. It is but a short inferential leap to suggest that we are implicitly teaching dependence upon authority, linear thinking, social apathy, passive involvement, and hands-off learning (p. 29).

For minority students, what this means is reproduction of the conditions of social injustice that characterized their parents' and grandparents' relationships with the dominant group.

### **Conclusion**

The Ramírez Report has documented the educational validity of strongly promoting biliteracy as an effective means to overall educational achievement for language-minority students. However, it has also pointed to the hidden curriculum operating in the schooling of language-minority students. While this hidden curriculum may be no different from that operating in most other educational contexts in the United States, its negative impact on minority students is especially pernicious. First, it limits students' opportunities to use their developing bilingual and biliteracy skills in a wide variety of situations, and thus restricts the development of both cognitive and linguistic abilities; second, it denies students the opportunity for self-expression, the expression of identity or voice. The conditions for student and community empowerment do not exist when educators adopt role definitions that accept the current societal power structure rather than challenge it. The transmission models of pedagogy that predominate in programs for language-minority students aim to produce compliant consumers of information (and disinformation) rather than critical generators of knowledge. The structures (e.g. curriculum, pedagogy, assessment practices) within which schooling for language-minority students is currently organized are specifically designed to prevent the creation of conditions for the development of student voice. The curriculum has been sanitized and student expression of identity stifled in order to deflect attention from the massive social injustices that have historically characterized, and still do characterize, the interactions between dominant and subordinated groups in the society. The challenge for educators who aspire to being more than a cog in the wheel of social reproduction is to create conditions for learning that expand rather than constrict students' possibilities for both identity formation and knowledge generation and that highlight rather than conceal the historical and current division of power and resources in the society.

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