

## Bilingual Education: An Overview

### The Need for Bilingual Education

Approximately five percent of the k-12 student population or 2.3 million children speak a native language other than English. However, the rate of limited English proficient (LEP) students is growing at a rate two-and-a-half times as fast as the general school population.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), one in six teachers in the U.S. has one or more LEP students in class. That same NAEP study found that approximately only one out of 16 teachers has had professional training in teaching LEP students. The problem is particularly acute at the secondary school level where older LEP students must meet graduation requirements.

Currently, nearly two-thirds of LEP students do not receive the special services they require. As the number of children whose native language is not English increases and the resources going to schools continues to be limited, the situation will probably deteriorate. The reasons for this probable deterioration are:

- increasingly limited financial resources
- the shortage of qualified instructors
- issues involving collective bargaining and workers' rights
- controversy over pedagogy

## What is Bilingual Education?

Bilingual education uses two languages as the media of instruction. The teacher develops English skills and teaches content in the native language. Bilingual education is one means of addressing the unique learning styles and instructional needs of language-minority students.

According to James Crawford, author of *Bilingual Education: History, Politics, Theory, and Practice*, the legal definition of bilingual education under Title VII is broad and requires only that some amount of native language and culture be used, along with ESL instruction. He notes that, contrary to public perception, English is the language of instruction for 72-92 percent of the instructional time.

There are five primary teaching approaches used today in the instruction of language minority students. The first three are bilingual approaches:

1. The maintenance or developmental approach - fosters parallel learning in two languages. Bilingual instructors teach academic subjects in the students' primary language. This enhances students' confidence and subject-matter comprehension — although according to critics, it interferes with their acquisition of English. Instruction is based on an enrichment model. Its objective is to create bilingual students. This approach is often used with K-6 students. While it takes two years for students to develop basic interpersonal communication skills

(BICS) or “playground English,” it usually takes five-to-seven years to fully speak another language.

2. The transitional approach - teaches academic subjects in the students’ primary language but progressively uses more English. As the students’ English-language proficiency increases, the primary language is dropped. This method seeks to place students in English classrooms more rapidly than maintenance or developmental approaches. It is the most common in the U.S.
3. The English-as-a Second-Language (ESL) approach - is where students attend one or more classes in which they learn to speak and write in English and sometimes go over material studied in other classes. All of the students’ other classes are conducted in English. ESL is a component of virtually all transitional and maintenance programs in the U.S. It is not an alternative to studying English. According to James Crawford, communication-based ESL is becoming the preferred method. This approach is based on the theory that language is acquired through exposure to comprehensible messages rather than learned through conscious study of syntax and vocabulary.

The fourth and fifth approaches are not bilingual.

4. The language submersion approach - places students in classes conducted entirely in a language which is not the students’ native language. Critics dub this the “sink or swim”

method. There is no effort to make the language comprehensible to students.

5. The immersion approach presents programs for students who lack enough English language skills to understand the regular curriculum. Many teachers use Sheltered English, also known as Alternate Immersion, which is a simplified vocabulary and sentence structure to teach school subjects. Teachers may also use the structured immersion method of teaching in English. In structured immersion, the teacher understands the native language and students may speak it to the teacher, although the teacher generally answers only in English.

Many programs combine ingredients from each of the five approaches in their bilingual classes.

Currently, the number of Americans whose native language is other than English is 34.7 million. However, only four percent of all Americans do not speak English at all. According to demographic research, linguistic assimilation has been increasing rather than slowing down.

The population of immigrants from Third World countries is rapidly increasing. By the year 2000, Hispanics and Asian Americans will represent 12 percent of American residents; by the year 2030, they will constitute 18 percent of the American population.

During the 1980’s, English Only initiatives passed in 14 states. Secretary of Education William Bennett

advocated greater “flexibility” to allow the Bilingual Education Act to fund non-bilingual programs such as immersion. He asserted that there was no evidence that documented the effectiveness of bilingual programs.

Due to the influx of immigrants who do not speak English, bilingual education is a necessary part of the education program for growing numbers of students. Much of the bilingual education debate has not focused on the children who need this education.

### A Brief History of Bilingual Education

During the 1960’s the American economy required literacy in English and a minimum of a high school degree for all students. If non-English speaking students were to have equal opportunity and full civil rights, they had to understand the dominant language of instruction.

The 1968 Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act or ESEA) reversed a two-hundred year laissez-faire attitude toward languages in the U.S. This Act supported and promoted the use of two languages in instruction for limited-English proficient (LEP) students. It did not specify teaching methodology; merely some use of the student’s native language in instruction.

The program was defined as compensatory or remedial education program rather than an innovative approach to language. Children in the program were considered to be

disadvantaged because of their handicap of not speaking English.

The goal of the Act—whether to promote bilingualism or speed the transition to English—has never been clearly defined. Thus, issues of political power and social status have become enmeshed with the question of educational effectiveness.

Before the Bilingual Education Act was passed, many states had laws allowing instruction in languages other than English. However, in 1971 Massachusetts became the first state to promote the use of bilingual education. Today more than 30 states permit bilingual instruction. Of these states, nine require bilingual education under certain circumstances; 21 promote some form of financial aid for bilingual programs. In addition, most states set standards for certifying bilingual or ESL teachers.

During the 1970’s parents from many different ethnic minority groups initiated lawsuits charging that the schools were discriminatory in not meeting their children’s language needs. They charged that the educational technique of submersion or “sink or swim” in mainstream classrooms was subjecting their children to unequal opportunity.

The major court case on the rights of language minority children, *Lau v. Nichols*, originated in 1970 when a Chinese child, Kinney Lau was failing school because he could not understand English, the language of instruction. The suit was a class action lawsuit where Lau was joined by 1,789 Chinese students in the same

predicament. In 1974 the court affirmed under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that schools must provide students who lack English fluency with special education programs to give them an equal education opportunity.

Immediately after the 1974 court decision, Congress passed the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) which required school districts to take affirmative steps to eliminate language barriers of non-English speaking students. By 1980, the federal Office of Civil Rights had negotiated 359 Lau plans to remedy past discrimination.

In 1984 Congress re-authorized Title VI with four percent of funds permitted for “special alternative instructional programs” that use no native language. For the first time the legislation also targeted family literacy, special and handicapped populations, replication of exemplary programs, and developmental bilingual education which supports native language maintenance.

By 1986, however, a Department of Education study showed that school districts were nine times less likely to be monitored for Lau under the Reagan administration than under the Carter and Ford administrations. Federal investigators continued to find violations in 58% of their reviews, but follow-ups were rare.

In 1991 the results of a seven-year study tracking 2,000 Spanish-speaking elementary students showed that students who receive bilingual instruction advance at the same rate as

other students and are not hindered in learning English. Based on this 4.5-million dollar study, the Department of Education has concluded that bilingual education benefits students.

### NEA’s Position on Bilingual Education

NEA’s 1965-66 “Tucson Survey on the Teaching of English to the Spanish-Speaking” and its symposium on “The Spanish-Speaking Child in the Schools of the Southwest” are credited with aiding the passage of the federal Bilingual Education Act. Since 1968 the NEA has issued policies and position statements at every Representative Assembly.

The 1973 Representative Assembly authorized the establishment of a two-year Task Force on Bilingual/Multi-cultural Education. This group formulated recommendations and set criteria for effective programs and appropriate state legislation.

Throughout the 1970s, NEA’s interest in bilingual education grew. The Association sponsored or participated in conferences on bilingual or migrant education and printed bilingual reports, supported strong enforcement of Lau, and promoted greater federal spending for bilingual education. It also was instrumental in the development of the bilingual children’s public television series *Villa Alegre*.

Throughout the 1980s, NEA has housed and supported the National Association for Bilingual Education (NABE), a professional and advocacy organization. It has disseminated resource and

instruction guides on bilingual education and has published a handbook which exposed the dangers of the English Only movement. Most recently, the NEA has supported the work of the English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC), an organization that affirms the value of “cultural and democratic pluralism” and that provides information on the value of being multi-lingual.

The NEA resolution on Educational Programs for Limited Proficiency Students states that LEP students must have programs that meet their unique needs and affirms that NEA is committed to providing equal opportunity to all students, regardless of their primary language. The Association values bilingual and multicultural competence and supports programs that assist individuals in attaining and maintaining proficiency in their native language before and after they acquire proficiency in English.

According to the resolution, these bilingual programs should:

- Emphasize English proficiency as their primary goal;
- Provide instruction in students’ native language from qualified teachers until English proficiency is attained;
- Meet students’ specific needs;
- Place students in bilingual, transitional, or maintenance bilingual programs, or if this is not feasible, in an ESL program;
- Never enroll LEP students in special education classes solely because of linguistic differences;
- Be promoted and supported at federal, state, and local levels.

In addition, educators must be fully involved in the development and implementation of these programs and should be fully compensated for any additional time spent in training and reimbursed for any training costs.

### Educational Issues

The need for bilingual education was not identified until the mid-1960s; in 1974 the federal government first started to provide special training. During the late ‘70s and early ‘80s educators began to ask questions about standards and credentials. However, at this time, 25 states do not offer credentials in this area.

The National Coalition of Advocates for Students has identified six components of quality bilingual programs:

1. Clearly articulated goals;
2. Identification and assessment of students;
3. Qualified and well-trained staff;
4. Availability of appropriate instructional materials;
5. Strong evaluation and research component, and;
6. Parental and community involvement.

Currently, there is a great shortage of qualified teachers for Limited English Proficient students. In response to the shortage of ESL and bilingual teachers some schools have hired more bilingual teacher assistants than bilingual teachers to serve their LEP students. However, few assistants are included in in-service programs and few teachers are trained in team-teaching or in teaching with bilingual assistants.

Of the teachers serving LEP students, over half of them have less than three years experience. Half of them do not speak any language but English and only one-third have any type of special training. Since there has been virtually no research on the qualities of an effective LEP teacher, there is no standard for training and assessment.

The shortage of bilingual teachers has also forced some school districts to develop crash courses in cultural sensitivity and second-language competency for regular teachers.

Another problem is that many schools discourage immigrants from enrolling. Once enrolled immigrant children may experience:

- Fear or discovery or deportation by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service;
- Intergroup conflict when immigrants are victimized;
- Great need for specialized support services due to serious physical and mental health problems.

In addition, their parents may also have great difficulty with language, culture

and class differences which separate them from the schools.

Current standardized tests do not adequately measure student achievement. They do not reflect higher order thinking skills or authentic, real life tasks (such as problem solving, communications skills, and collaboration) which could be shown through portfolios. New assessments are needed which will accurately measure educational progress for individuals and school systems on both a national and international basis.

#### English Plus

Research by psycholinguist Kenji Hakuta of University of California, Santa Cruz, and Catherine Snow of the Harvard Graduate School of Education shows that bilingualism has educational advantages beyond language competency itself. Their interpretation of the research on second-language acquisition shows:

- Early childhood is not the optimum time to acquire a second language; older children and adults are “more efficient language learners”. Thus, the sense of urgency in introducing English to non-English speaking children and concern about postponing children’s exit from bilingual programs are misplaced;
- Language for conversation, which is quite different from language for schooling, develops first;
- A child with a strong foundation in the first language will perform better in English over the long term;

- Reading should be taught in the native language, particularly for children who, for other reasons, run the risk of reading failure. Reading skills acquired in the native language will transfer readily and quickly to English and will result in higher reading achievement in English;
- Very possibly, bilingualism enhances children's thinking skills.

In our nation, among native English speaking students, being bilingual is considered to be a sign of a superior education and culture. Yet native non-English speaking students are told that their native language is not valued. Two-way bilingual education is one approach supported both by researchers and by members of many ethnic groups. Two-way bilingual education, which is sometimes called dual or two-way immersion, teaches students who are monolingual in English and in another native language by using two languages. It provides foreign language instruction for native English speakers as it provides English instruction for non-English speaking students. Thus, all students and teachers in a two-way immersion program learn a second language

What can Local Associations Do?

**Local associations can:**

- Inform members about bilingual workshops and conferences;
- Establish a policy on bilingual education;
- Work with community groups to promote understanding and support for the issue;

- Collaborate with key organizations and parent groups;
- Establish a speakers bureau to address the equity issues with external groups;
- Coalesce with language minority groups and seek their support;
- Seek out teacher members to teach or tutor LEP persons;
- Establish a network of organizations, agencies, and individuals that support each other and work in the area of bilingual education.

Key Organizations

Asian American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (AALDEF)  
99 Hudson Street  
12th floor  
New York City, New York 10013

English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC)  
1150 Connecticut Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 507  
Washington, D.C. 20036

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)  
777 N. Capitol Street, N.E.  
Suite 305  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
(202) 408-0060

Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF)  
733 15th Street, N.W.  
Suite 920  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
(202) 728-4074

National Association for Asian and  
Pacific American Education (NAAPAE)  
c/o ARC  
310 8th Street  
Suite 307  
Oakland, California 94607  
(512) 272-9536

National Association for Bilingual  
Education  
810 First Street, N.E.  
Third floor  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
(202) 898-1829

National Clearinghouse for Bilingual  
Education  
1118 22nd Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20037  
(202) 467-0867

National Council of La Raza  
810 First Street, N.E.  
Suite 300  
Washington, D C 20002  
(202) 785-1670

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other  
Languages (TESOL)  
1600 Cameron Street  
Suite 300  
Alexandria, Virginia 22314  
(703) 836-0774