

Agenda for Inaction*

Research on bilingualism in American schools has more often addressed the preoccupations of policymakers than the needs of students, parents, or educators. Major studies, following passage of the Bilingual Education Act (1968), were designed primarily to justify or repudiate existing policies. Funded largely by the federal government, they focused largely on program results: Was the government getting good value for its money? Did bilingual education 'work'? Or would English-only instruction be more 'effective'? This emphasis came at the expense of more complex investigations into the learning of diverse student populations under diverse conditions. Generally speaking, pragmatism reigned while theory was slighted; simplistic questions were asked and, as a result, few of the answers were pedagogically valuable.¹

Such shortcomings are hardly unusual in government-sponsored research. What has distinguished research on language-minority education, however, has been its increasing politicization. Since the early 1980s, bilingualism has become a lightning rod for ethnic tensions in the wider society. Hence the undue emphasis on language of instruction. The question of whether or not to use minority mother tongues in public-school classrooms became charged with political symbolism. Though hardly the only variable in outcomes for English language learners (ELLs), it was often treated as such in policy deliberations, including those involving the design and interpretation of research.

One sure constant in the policymaking process has been advocacy, with two 'sides' lobbying for and against bilingual education. Ironically, this polarized environment has tended to limit rather than foster a vigorous debate within the field. Researchers have learned to be careful in what they say, knowing their words can and will be used against them in other forums, often distorted or out of context. Few would deny that such polarization interferes with serious studies of language and learning. Certainly, it tends to distort the process of making pedagogical decisions for students, whose interests are often subordinated to ideological concerns. Yet, among

*Response to a focus article by Eugene E. García, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 155/156 (2002), 93–99. Copyright © 2002 by Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. Reprinted by permission.

researchers today, there is no firm consensus on how to respond to this state of affairs, at either the scientific level or the political level.

Eugene García (2002) suggests that the remedy for politicization is a different kind of research agenda. Rather than pursue the chimera of a universally effective program model for ELLs, he favors developing a 'knowledge base' of 'best practices' shown to have long-term benefits 'for bilingual children and families with different characteristics under [varying] circumstances,' along with an understanding of why specific interventions are beneficial. 'It is the lack of answers to [these] critical questions,' he argues, 'that places educational services to Hispanic students² in jeopardy of haphazard and highly politicized policy initiatives like California's Proposition 227,' the ballot measure that dismantled most of the state's bilingual programs. Presumably, if researchers and educators could do a better job in shaping effective pedagogies, voters and politicians could be dissuaded from their rash actions.

This approach is consistent with recent recommendations by the National Research Council (NRC) in *Improving Schooling for Language-Minority Children: A Research Agenda*:

We need to think in terms of program components, not politically motivated labels. ... Theory-based interventions need to be created and evaluated. ... A developmental model needs to be created for use in predicting the effects of program components on children in different environments. (August & Hakuta, 1997: 138)

In essence, the NRC panel called for a ceasefire in the conflict over language of instruction. It concluded that 'beneficial effects' were apparent both in 'programs that are labeled "bilingual education" [and] in some programs that are labeled "immersion." ... We see little value in conducting evaluations to determine which type of program is best' (p. 147). In a press release announcing its report, the National Research Council (1997: 2) went even further in characterizing the state of knowledge about ELL pedagogies: 'Evaluations have proved inconclusive about which teaching approaches work best.' Accordingly, the NRC urged policymakers to call off their hunt for the best 'one-size-fits-all program' and support instead 'a model for research and development that would be grounded in knowledge about the linguistic, social, and cognitive development of children' (p. 3).

With its even-handed criticisms and distaste for advocacy by 'all sides,' the panel sought to stake out a sensible center between ideological extremes. It appealed for a separation of pedagogy from politics that would free researchers to function as scientists without partisan interference, better able to study the diverse needs of ELL students and to provide

constructive advice to policymakers. A high-minded prescription, hard to fault in the abstract. But is this the right medicine for the patient?

Since the NRC issued its report, policymaking in this area has become more politicized, not less. In 1998, voters adopted a law mandating English-only instruction in the public schools of California, home to nearly 40% of the nation's ELLs. Researchers in bilingualism and applied linguistics played a limited role in the campaign; few made any serious effort to inform the public about the scientific evidence supporting bilingual education.³

Meanwhile, academic critics were stepping up their activism. Although these enthusiasts of all-English 'structured immersion' approaches represent a tiny slice of the research community, they are expanding their influence over pundits and politicians, lending credibility to media assaults on bilingual programs, aligning themselves with conservative advocacy groups, and unabashedly supporting initiatives like Proposition 227. The public appetite for restrictive legislation continues to grow, jeopardizing bilingual program options for an increasing number of students. As a result, decisions on how to teach English learners are being made not in the classroom, but in legislative chambers and voting booths; not on the basis of educational research data, but on the basis of public opinion, often passionate but rarely informed.

Clearly, the malady of politicization is growing worse. Will the NRC's advice 'to move [research] beyond the narrow focus on language of instruction' (p. 14) – in effect, to withdraw from the feverish debate on this issue – contribute to a cure? Is García's prescription, a better theoretical grasp of the pedagogical issues, likely to remedy the epidemic of English-only initiatives spreading from California? Should researchers stick to their specialties and leave politics to the 'advocates'? Or are there flaws in this diagnosis? I believe there are several, beginning with its concept of politicization itself.

The NRC report seems to equate politicized with political. The two are not the same. Research becomes politicized when external interests, such as the quest for power, status, influence, or resources, come to dominate and distort the process of scientific inquiry. Polemic takes the place of collegial discussion. Objectivity is compromised, or at least disputed vehemently, by each side. Politicization hinders the production and dissemination of research findings, as evidenced by the current state of the bilingual education controversy.

Yet virtually all research, especially educational research supported by tax dollars, takes place in a political context. The questions asked, the protocols adopted, the programs included and excluded, and the funding allocated (among other things) are all influenced to a greater or lesser

extent by stakeholders. This is inevitable and normal. Like it or not, researchers must contend with such realities, for example, the continuing public skepticism about the benefits of native-language instruction in fostering the acquisition of English.

Moreover, the debate over education policy, with its broad impact on individuals and society, inevitably involves the distribution of power and resources – in a word: politics. In a democracy, how could it be otherwise? The Bilingual Education Act was a product of the 1960s movement for civil rights. It stressed the principle of equal opportunity for language-minority students, whose educational needs had long been ignored. Expert opinion alone would never have prompted this sweeping reform; a political movement was required.

No pedagogical approach was prescribed at the national level until the mid-1970s. At that time, the federal government began to require some use of native-language instruction for English learners, first for school programs receiving bilingual education grants and later, as part of the Lau Remedies (OCR, 1975),⁴ for school districts found to have violated these students' civil rights. These decisions were based less on expert opinion, which tended to classify bilingual education as a promising experiment, than on the perceived need to break the resistance of many school districts to effectively addressing language barriers in the classroom. Policymakers were seeking a radical reform, something more than an add-on class in English as a second language, that would force resisters to revamp services for ELLs. Native-language instruction filled the bill. It also broke with an English-only regime that devalued minority languages and, especially in Southwestern schools, punished students for speaking them. Bilingual education thereby promised to challenge ethnic power relationships and bolster the self-esteem of minority students. For enthusiasts at the time, the field's pedagogical potential was in no way diminished by the limited research base on program effectiveness. They expected that to materialize. And indeed it did over the next two decades, even if, as the NRC report complains, the number of high-quality experimental studies⁵ remains limited (owing in part to federal funding constraints).

Certainly, this was a 'political' orientation, as indeed the early advocates of bilingual education saw it, a continuation of the struggle for equal educational opportunity. But it was a far cry from 'politicization.' Contrary to the frequently leveled charge, this agenda had little or nothing to do with ethnic nationalism or separatism or even language maintenance. When La Raza Unida Party, a militant Chicano group, captured a majority of seats on the school board in Crystal City, Texas, it instituted a transitional form of bilingual education; teaching English was the primary goal (Shockley, 1974).

To locate the source of today's politicization – and that would seem essential to combating it – one needs to examine the modern English-only movement and the conservative forces that have exploited it for political advantage. US English, founded in 1983, struck an unexpected chord with many Anglo-Americans by charging that government accommodations for limited-English speakers, bilingual education in particular, were an invitation to balkanization and language conflict. William Bennett, US secretary of education for much of the Reagan administration, soon took up the cause. He charged that bilingual education had become a means of fostering ethnic identity at the expense of teaching students English (Bennett, 1985). Rather than grapple with research evidence to the contrary, he pronounced the research 'inconclusive' and called for increased federal funding of 'structured immersion' in English, a demand that Congress granted in 1988.

Bennett's advocacy, along with efforts to declare English the nation's official language, served to politicize bilingual education as never before. By the 1990s, the tepid response of language-minority advocates to these attacks, the failure of bilingual educators to explain their mission to the public, and the rise of anti-immigrant fervor had combined to weaken the standing of the field even further.

In 1997, a clever ideologue named Ron Unz recognized both the political vulnerability of bilingual education and the issue's potential to boost his brand of conservative Republicanism (not to mention his own hopes as a candidate for high office). With the support of academic critics such as Christine Rossell and Rosalie Porter and pundits such as Linda Chávez of the rightist Center for Equal Opportunity, Unz sponsored the campaign for Proposition 227 (1998). No longer was it merely a question of eliminating a 'mandate' for bilingual education; now the goal was eliminating native-language instruction altogether and replacing it with a one-size-fits-all, English-immersion program 'not intended to last more than one year' (Art. 2, §305). California voters approved the measure in a 61 to 39% landslide.

Would the outcome have been different if researchers in language education (not to mention the ineffectual No on 227 campaign) had played a more active part in explaining the issues to the voters? No one can say. But polling data make it clear that many fair-minded Californians, not just the mean-spirited nativists, voted in favor of Proposition 227 because they saw bilingual education as *an alternative, not a means* to teaching English (see, e.g. Los Angeles Times Poll, 1998a).

If researchers continue to resist a 'political' role, as Unz and like-minded advocates expand their campaign to other states, the future of native languages in the classroom is dubious at best. No doubt some excellent

programs will survive, as they have survived in California, post-227. In particular, two-way bilingual education, or dual immersion (its politically sanitized label), remains popular with many English-speaking parents who recognize the opportunity to provide their children the benefits of fluent bilingualism. A certain number of language-minority students will be needed to make these programs effective (i.e. to 'service' the needs of the Anglo students). The broader trend, however, points toward a two-tier system, in which the great majority of ELL students are denied an opportunity to develop their heritage-language skills.

Absent a change in political climate, bilingual education will come under increasing pressure at state and federal levels. One likely result is that it will be increasingly marginalized, transformed into a gifted-and-talented program serving only a small fraction of the students who need it most. Or it will be reduced to a quick-exit, remedial program that limits native-language development, an approach that flatly contradicts findings from the most rigorous research to date (e.g. Ramírez *et al.*, 1991).

Under the circumstances, to advise researchers to ignore the language-of-instruction controversy and focus their attention on less political matters seems a bit like preaching disarmament in response to invading Cossacks. Not a very effective tactic for the peasants.

Notes

1. Ramírez *et al.* (1991) stands out as an important exception.
2. It is worth noting that students from numerous other language groups are similarly affected
3. Eugene García and Kenji Hakuta, co-chair of the NRC panel, were among the noteworthy exceptions to this pattern.
4. Issued in 1975, these were a set of civil rights 'guidelines' designed to carry out the *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) decision of the US Supreme Court. A proposal to formalize the Lau Remedies as permanent regulations was withdrawn by the Reagan administration in 1981. The federal government has never again sought to mandate any pedagogical approach for limited-English-proficient students, other than in requirements to use native-language instruction in a portion of school programs funded through the Bilingual Education Act. For more information on the Lau Remedies, see pp. 82, 84, and 161–162.
5. As Cummins (1999) and Krashen (1999) have pointed out, experimental studies are hardly the only measure of the success of bilingual education. Theoretically driven research that tests and refines hypotheses about language and learning is, if anything, more valuable in guiding classroom practice.