

Introduction

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was made flesh. It was so in the beginning and it is so today. The language, the Word, carries within it the history, the culture, the traditions, the very life of a people, the flesh. Language is people. We cannot even conceive of a people without a language, or a language without a people. The two are one and the same. To know one is to know the other.

Sabine Ulibarri

The **Bilingual Education Act of 1968**¹ marked a new outlook toward Americans whose mother tongue is not English. Previously in our history, minority languages had been accommodated at certain times, repressed at others. Most often, they had been ignored. The assumption was, and is, that non-English speakers would naturally come to see the advantages of adopting the majority language as their own. Notwithstanding episodes of intolerance – most egregiously toward Native Americans – *laissez-faire* has usually predominated, a policy that has served to foster assimilation on a voluntary basis. Millions of immigrants have abandoned their native tongues and embraced English in what is arguably the largest, fastest, and most diverse language shift in recorded history, a phenomenon that one linguist has described as “Babel in reverse.”

But the neglect of minority tongues was not entirely benign. Contrary to myth, immigrant children were more likely to sink than swim in English-language classrooms. In 1908, just 13 percent of such students who were enrolled in New York City schools at age 12 went on to high school (as compared with 32 percent of white children whose parents were native-born). Some immigrants succeeded without formal schooling, thanks to strong backs, entrepreneurial talents, or political skills; they too were in the minority.

By the 1960s, while high dropout rates persisted among language-minority children, the country’s economy had changed. Upward mobility was no longer an option for those without English literacy. Prospects were doubly limited for groups who faced discrimination on the basis of race as well as language and culture: Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians. Public schools were largely neglecting their needs; some went so far as to punish students for speaking their native tongue.

At the same time, the civil-rights movement was beginning to energize language-minority communities. Parents who had themselves been shortchanged by English-only schools were seeking a better deal for their children. Desegregation was important, but equal opportunity demanded more than equal treatment if students could not understand the language of instruction.

New Federal Role

Recognizing this “acute educational problem,” Congress moved to promote “new and imaginative programs” for educating children whose English was limited. The law, also known as **Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act**, funded experimental approaches in which students were taught partly in their native tongue and partly in English. The idea was to prepare them to succeed in English-language classrooms, to ease their transition to the mainstream.

This approach became known as **transitional bilingual education**. Though unfamiliar to most Americans at the time, it was by no means unprecedented. Minority-language schooling, bilingual and otherwise, had been widespread before World War I in localities where speakers of French, Spanish, and especially German had amassed political clout. But never before had it been endorsed as national policy.

Not that Congress had a clear idea of what bilingual education would mean in practice; only a handful of such programs even existed in 1968. The lawmakers simply resolved that *something* had to be done about the schools’ negligence toward children with limited English skills. Otherwise these students would be denied an **equal educational opportunity**, a conclusion soon to be endorsed by the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1974, the *Lau v. Nichols* decision made school boards, not children or parents, responsible for overcoming language barriers that impede students’ access to the curriculum. Failure to do so would “make a mockery of public education,” the high court said. As a matter of “simple justice,” federal officials soon began to require bilingual education as a remedy where school districts had violated the civil rights of **limited-English-proficient** (LEP) children.² This policy was not based on a firm foundation of scientific research – which was nonexistent at the time – but rather on a determination to break decisively with past practices of English-only schooling.

In short, federal support for bilingual education was a leap of faith, an experiment based more on good intentions than good pedagogy. That is no longer a fair

assessment. Bilingual approaches now reflect the latest findings in linguistics and cognitive psychology. The past three decades have brought enormous advances in curricula, methodologies, materials, and teacher training. Research-based program models have proven their effectiveness in the classroom, even in high-poverty schools where failure was once the norm. There is no question that bilingual education has benefited LEP children.

That does not mean its success has been uniform. Using students' native language for instruction is hardly a magic wand that turns mediocre schools into excellent ones. Some bilingual programs have been crudely conceived, unsupported by administrators, or "bilingual" in name only. At times teachers have lacked training in second-language acquisition or fluency in the vernacular of their students. Many English language learners have been rushed into regular classrooms prematurely, their native tongues treated as disabilities to be overcome rather than resources to be developed. Too often, academic results have been disappointing. Such weaknesses have made bilingual education vulnerable to criticism.

Cases of poor implementation, however, cannot invalidate the theoretical rationale or practical success of the best bilingual models. A four-year longitudinal study, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and released in 1991, reported that LEP children were thriving in programs designed to develop, rather than replace, their native language. By the 6th grade, these students were achieving at or near grade level in reading and mathematics – when tested in English – while continuing to increase their proficiency in Spanish. This finding confirmed a growing consensus among researchers in second-language acquisition: *There is no contradiction between promoting fluent bilingualism and promoting academic achievement in English; indeed, these goals are mutually supporting.*

In 1994, when Congress voted to extend the Bilingual Education Act, it made both objectives explicit for the first time. Besides teaching English to LEP children and helping them meet rigorous academic standards, the law articulated a new purpose: "developing bilingual skills and multicultural understanding." As a result, **developmental bilingual education**, including "two-way" programs serving English-proficient as well as language-minority students, began to receive substantial support for the first time. Policymakers seemed to recognize that language diversity was not just a problem to be remedied; it was also a potential asset to be valued. With this recognition, Title VII finally endorsed a cherished goal of educators: Bilingual instruction would be a way to "develop our Nation's national language resources, thus promoting our Nation's competitiveness in the global economy."

The **language-as-resource** policy proved to be short-lived. Not that it failed in the classroom or declined in popularity with parents or fared poorly in scientific studies. The problem was political. In the fall of 1994, California voters adopted Proposition 187, a crackdown on “illegal aliens” that, among other things, required educators to deny schooling to immigrant children who were undocumented and to report their families to law enforcement. Though the measure was later ruled unconstitutional in federal court, its political impact was substantial. Congress soon voted to limit the rights and benefits of all immigrants, regardless of their legal status. In 1996, the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation recognizing English as the nation’s official language and prohibiting most uses of other languages by federal government agencies and officials (the bill died without a vote in the Senate). Another English-only campaign soon erupted in California, home to 40 percent of the nation’s LEP students. In 1998, voters adopted **Proposition 227**, dismantling most bilingual programs throughout the state and mandating a one-year, all-English approach. Similar measures later passed in Arizona and Massachusetts.

Perhaps the most significant blow came in 2002: repeal of the Bilingual Education Act. Under new legislation, known as **No Child Left Behind**, federal competitive grants for programs serving LEP students have been replaced by formula grants administered by the states. Not just the goal of developing native-language skills, but all references to bilingualism have been expunged from the law. While bilingual education is still eligible for funding, several new provisions – including mandatory, high-stakes testing in English – encourage schools to move toward all-English instruction. No Child Left Behind puts great stress on “scientifically based research” as a guide for program design. Thus far, however, no such basis has been offered for the federal policy reversal on educating English learners.

Sources of Opposition

Ironically, political support for bilingual education was stronger in the 1960s, when the concept was virtually untested, than it is after four decades of program experience and research that have documented its benefits. Once accepted by a majority of the American public, native-language instruction is under attack today as never before. Why is this happening?

One reason is that, with little public discussion, the Bilingual Education Act broke with a 200-year-old tradition: the federal government’s reluctance to legislate on matters of language. What’s more, the new policy seemed to contradict cherished assumptions about the **Melting Pot**, or more precisely, about the **Anglo-**

conformist ethic in American culture. The law's purpose was left unclear. Was it designed as a transitional program to assimilate children into the English mainstream? Or as a developmental program that encouraged students to preserve – and society to tolerate – their non-English heritage? Bilingual educators saw no contradiction between these goals, but members of the public increasingly did. While a quick transition to English was generally embraced, the idea of maintaining other languages produced skepticism and anxiety. Was the priority to give children an equal chance to succeed? Or to reinforce their ethnic identity and create jobs for Spanish-speaking teachers? In short, bilingual education has aroused passions about issues of political power and social status that are far removed from the classroom.

Second, a less restrictive immigration policy, adopted in 1965, set in motion enormous demographic changes. It increased not only the numbers of immigrants but also their racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Up until the 1950s, 85 percent of immigrants to the United States had come from Europe; by the 1980s, 85 percent of them were coming from the Third World, mainly from Asia and Latin America.³ These trends continued through the 1990s, a decade in which Americans of Hispanic origin increased by 58 percent, displacing African-Americans as the nation's largest "minority." In the 2000 census, 47 million U.S. residents – nearly one in five – reported speaking a language other than English at home. For more than 28 million, that language was Spanish – a group that has grown at 10 times the rate of English-only speakers since 1980 (see *Table 1–2, page 5*).

The new bilingualism has proved jarring to many Americans, especially to those who came of age during times of limited immigration, when monolingualism in English was considered the norm. Hearing other languages spoken freely in public or seeing government provide services in Spanish and Chinese has fostered the perception that English is losing ground, that newcomers no longer care to learn the national tongue. Bilingual education often gets the blame. Editorializing about the 2000 census, the *Washington Post* called the English proficiency of immigrant youth "shamefully low." It speculated that schools were "teaching mainly in Spanish," thereby retarding the process of assimilation.

Yet the available evidence indicates otherwise. Rather than slowing down, the shift from minority languages to English is clearly accelerating – from the classic three-generation pattern, common at the turn of the 20th century, to a two-generation pattern at the turn of the 21st. Simply put, the children of immigrants are losing their mother tongues at unprecedented rates. This is occurring despite the dramatic increase in U.S. residents who speak languages other than English. It is a paradox that many Americans have yet to grasp: while the population of minority

language speakers continues to climb because of immigration, today’s immigrants are learning English – and adopting it as their preferred language – more rapidly than ever before.

Nevertheless, in communities where they have concentrated, the newcomers are exerting a major and, for some of their neighbors, an unwelcome impact. A new type of nativism has emerged in response. In the early 1900s, those who felt a similar threat from “alien races” raised claims of Anglo-Saxon superiority to justify the exclusion of eastern and southern Europeans. Such explicit appeals to racial loyalty are no longer acceptable in our political discourse. Language loyalties, on the other hand, remain largely devoid of associations with social injustice. While race is immutable, immigrants can and often do exchange their mother tongue for another. To insist that they learn English seems reasonable to most Americans – including

TABLE I-1
English Language Learner Enrollment Growth by State, 1990s

	2000-01	1990-91	Growth		2000-01	1990-91	Growth
Total	3,908,095	2,202,350	77%	Missouri	11,535	3,815	202%
Alabama	6,877	1,052	554%	Montana	7,567	6,635	14%
Alaska	20,057	11,184	79%	Nebraska	10,301	1,257	719%
Arizona	135,248	65,727	106%	Nevada	40,131	9,057	343%
Arkansas	10,599	2,000	430%	New Hampshire	2,727	1,146	138%
California	1,511,646	986,462	53%	New Jersey	52,890	47,560	11%
Colorado	59,018	17,187	243%	New Mexico	63,755	73,505	-13%
Connecticut	20,629	16,988	21%	New York	239,097	168,203	42%
Delaware	2,371	1,969	20%	North Carolina	52,835	6,030	776%
Dist. of Columbia	5,554	3,379	64%	North Dakota	8,874	7,187	23%
Florida	254,517	83,937	203%	Ohio	19,868	8,992	121%
Georgia	64,949	6,487	901%	Oklahoma	43,670	15,860	175%
Hawaii	12,897	9,730	33%	Oregon	47,382	7,557	527%
Idaho	20,968	3,986	426%	Pennsylvania	31,353	15,000	109%
Illinois	140,528	79,291	77%	Rhode Island	10,161	7,632	33%
Indiana	17,193	4,670	268%	South Carolina	7,004	1,205	481%
Iowa	11,436	3,705	209%	South Dakota	5,883	6,691	-12%
Kansas	16,088	4,661	245%	Tennessee	12,475	3,660	240%
Kentucky	6,017	1,071	462%	Texas	570,022	313,234	82%
Louisiana	7,268	8,345	-13%	Utah	44,030	14,860	196%
Maine	2,737	1,983	38%	Vermont	997	500	99%
Maryland	23,891	12,701	88%	Virginia	37,385	15,130	147%
Massachusetts	44,747	42,606	5%	Washington	58,455	28,646	104%
Michigan	47,252	37,112	27%	West Virginia	1,139	231	393%
Minnesota	45,012	13,204	241%	Wisconsin	35,312	14,648	141%
Mississippi	3,225	2,753	17%	Wyoming	2,523	1,919	31%

Sources: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition; U.S. Department of Education.

most immigrants themselves – as documented in public opinion surveys. Yet language politics can also provide a respectable veneer for racial politics. Hence the rise of the **English-only movement**, which has exploited anxieties about bilingualism to advance a broader nativist agenda.

Third, bilingual education is contentious, especially in school districts experiencing a rapid influx of language-minority children, for the simple reason that it disrupts established patterns. For administrators it can cause multiple headaches – the need to recruit qualified teachers, redesign curricula, reorganize class schedules – that most would prefer to avoid. Monolingual teachers fear reassignment, loss of status, or other career setbacks. English-speaking parents worry about the neglect of their own children. Taxpayers expect the bill to be outlandish, assuming (incorrectly) that all-English programs would be less expensive. While such fears usually prove to be exaggerated, school restructuring to meet changing needs is rarely painless.

Yet the demographic challenge must be faced. From 1991 to 2001, the number English learners identified by American schools nearly doubled, to an estimated 3.9 million (*see Table I-1*). Their enrollment growth was especially dramatic in states like Nevada (343 percent), Kentucky (462 percent), Oregon (527 percent), Nebraska (719 percent), North Carolina (776 percent), and Georgia (901 percent). These students' educational needs are formidable. In study after study, a non-English-language background has been correlated with higher rates of falling behind, failing, and dropping out.

Research also shows that – contrary to the claims of some politicians – there are no quick fixes, no methodologies that offer a short-cut to second-language learning. **Structured English immersion** programs, mandated by Proposition 227 in California, were advertised as a way to teach English in one school year or less. Since voters approved the initiative, however, the annual percentage of LEP children reclassified as fluent in English has remained virtually unchanged. Banning most native-language instruction has failed to speed up the acquisition of English.

Language Attitudes

Finally, bilingual education arouses opposition because it contradicts peculiarly American ideas about language. As a people we have relatively limited experience with bilingualism on the one hand, and strongly held views about it on the other. Monolinguals in this country seldom appreciate the time and effort involved in acquiring a second language (though they may not feel up to the task themselves). Ignorance of linguistic matters is commonplace even in educated circles. Kenneth

G. Wilson, professor of English and former vice president of the University of Connecticut, sounds authoritative when he writes:

Almost all the well-meaning claims for bilingual education turn out to be irrelevant because language doesn't work that way. ... We must do everything to introduce the second language as early as possible, the earlier the better. Nursery school is better than kindergarten, kindergarten better than first grade, and first grade better than later grades. ... Even twenty years ago we knew a fair number of things about the way children learn language. We knew many of these things only empirically then; today we have much more basic science in hand to explain these empirical data.

In fact, Professor Wilson seems to have no inkling of the recent advances in psycholinguistic research. Here he merely restates the folk wisdom that language-minority students must be taught English while they are young, before it is "too late." This notion was part of the successful sales pitch for Proposition 227. The initiative's sponsor attacked bilingual education for allegedly delaying students' exposure to English "past the age at which they can easily learn it." On that basis, many Californians bought the mandate for English-only instruction.

Yet scientific evidence has mounted steadily against the "critical period" hypothesis that, to reach full proficiency in a second language, students must acquire it before puberty. Young children do seem to have an advantage in mastering the phonological aspects of language – that is, in learning to speak without a "foreign" accent. A growing body of research, however, shows that older learners, with their greater cognitive capacity and knowledge of the world, have the edge when it comes to acquiring grammar and vocabulary.⁴ Some studies have shown a very gradual, age-related decline in language-learning abilities among adults. Yet researchers have found no "cut-off" point at which they are lost. While many questions remain to be answered in this area, worries about harming LEP children by delaying all-English instruction turn out to be groundless.

Where did Professor Wilson get his information? Like most others who cherish this myth, he was able to cite only "personal anecdotal evidence ... from watching my two-to-three-year-old daughter learn Norwegian." A far cry from the "basic science" he invokes. The point here is not to single out the professor for rebuke, but to illustrate the prevalence of opinionated discourse about language. It is a subject that is dear to all of us, bound up with individual and group identity, social status, intellect, culture, nationalism, and human rights. When it comes to language, we are willing to take on the experts. Laypersons who would feel unquali-

fied to speak on other pedagogical topics are eager to express their views about bilingual education.

Certainly this is a matter that *should* concern all Americans. It is not just a question of how we will run our schools, but of what kind of society we aspire to be: pluralist or conformist, humane or intolerant. All the more reason that the discussion should be informed. My aim in this book is to provide the factual context – the diversity, history, theory, practice, and politics of educating English learners – for those who hope to understand, and perhaps become a part of, this important field.

Notes

1. Throughout this book key terms are highlighted in boldface type.
2. For understandable reasons, the term LEP, **limited-English-proficient**, has fallen into disfavor in recent years. Rather than recognizing children for what they have – valuable skills in languages other than English – it defines them on the basis of what they lack. Unfortunately, in the author's view, none of the proposed alternatives is without drawbacks. Moreover, LEP has a precise meaning in federal and state education laws, as well as court decisions, that remains unmatched by other terminology. It also represents a conceptual advance over the term it replaced, **limited-English-speaking**, by encompassing proficiencies in reading, writing, and listening. A more neutral label, **English language learner** (ELL), is preferred by many in the field. But it, too, suggests a single-minded focus on English acquisition that tends to slight students' other pedagogical needs. Various other terms, including **speakers of other languages** (SOLs), **primary home language speakers other than English** (PHLOTEs), **potentially English proficient** (PEP) students, and **bilingual children**, tend to suffer from vagueness; none has caught on widely. All of which suggests that the quest for a perfect label is probably futile. In this volume, LEP and English learner will be used interchangeably.
3. In the 1950s the top five source countries of immigrants to the United States were (in descending order) Germany, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Italy. By the 1980s they were Mexico, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, and China (including Taiwan).
4. Starting young is an advantage in the sense that proficiency in a second language takes several years to achieve. No researcher would dispute this rationale for early instruction in **English as a second language** (ESL) or **foreign languages in elementary school** (FLES). But there appears to be no pedagogical basis for hurrying LEP children into mainstream classrooms; in fact, such practices can be harmful.