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The False Dichotomy Between ESL and Transitional Bilingual Education Programs: Issues That Challenge All of Us

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If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time.
But, if you have come because your liberation
is bound with mine, then let us work together.
(Aboriginal Woman)

Introduction

Over the past three decades, the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in U.S. schools has grown at a rapid rate (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Culturally and linguistically diverse students (hereafter referred to as CLD) are those students who speak a language other than English and who bring diverse cultural heritages to their classrooms (Baca & Cervantes, 1998). Many of these students enter school with little or no English proficiency. In urban areas, this population is the fastest growing of all school-aged populations. The population of CLD students in U.S. schools is ethnically and linguistically diverse. In 1995, for example, federally funded Title VII programs served students in 198 different language groups (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

It is important to note that while the CLD population is diverse, it has heavy concentrations of students speaking one of several languages. For example, 73% of all CLD students speak Spanish as a primary language. Vietnamese speakers are the next most common group, and account for 4% of the population. Hmong, Cantonese, Cambodian, Korean, Laotian and Navajos make up the next most frequently spoken languages, and they account for 2% each of the CLD population. It short, 8 languages account for over 85% of the linguistic diversity in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

The numbers listed above raise some important questions. We often hear that native language instruction cannot be done because of the diverse number of native languages represented in the schools. Schools argue that diverse language groups in their districts prevent them from doing native language instruction, purchasing classroom or library books in languages other than English or developing assessment instruments in non-English languages. In fact, over 95% of all of the linguistic diversity in U.S. public schools is accounted for by only 8 languages. Implementation of poor quality programs for CLD students is often justified on the basis of "too much diversity" and "too many languages." This is quite simply an excuse.

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There is little controversy about the growth of the CLD student population in U.S. public schools and the concomitant challenges that this growing diversity poses to teachers and policy makers. However, over the past 30 years, there has been considerable controversy about how to most effectively educate CLD students. Two basic educational programs have evolved. The first are programs commonly known as English as a Second Language programs (ESL). The second are programs commonly called bilingual education programs (Lessow-Hurley, 1990; Kjolseth, 1976). Implementation of each type of program varies greatly from state to state, district to district and school to school. There is even variation of program implementation within schools.

Basically, English as a Second Language programs focus on teaching English to CLD students who have been labeled as limited English proficient (LEP). These programs do not make formal use of a student's native language in instruction. There are many varieties of ESL programs including pull-out ESL, in-class ESL, and content area ESL known as SADIE or sheltered English instruction (Peregoy & Boyle, 1997). The goal of ESL programs is to develop English skills and proficiency in students in order to get them into all English classrooms as quickly as possible (Lessow-Hurley, 1990; Peregoy & Boyle, 1993).

Bilingual education programs, on the other hand, are educational programs that utilize a student's native language as a medium of instruction, and, at the same time, teach English as a second language (Lessow-Hurley, 1990). As with ESL, there are many different types of bilingual education programs. They range from those focused on early exit (using the native language for a short period of time, and moving students into all English classes as quickly as possible) to programs that are long term and have goals to develop bilingualism and biliteracy. These are often called developmental or additive bilingual education programs (Lessow-Hurley, 1990; Crawford, 1995). Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the development and implementation of two-way dual language bilingual programs. These programs include CLD students and native English speaking students. The goals of these programs include the development of bilingualism and biliteracy in all students (Christian, Montone, Lindholm, & Carranza, 1997). In spite of the enthusiasm for two-way bilingual programs, however, 95% of all bilingual education programs in the U.S. are early exit transitional models designed to get students into all English classrooms as quickly as possible (August & Hakuta, 1997).

Over the past thirty years, ESL and bilingual education programs have been pitted against each other by politicians, the popular press, academics and teachers and policy makers. The eternal evaluation and research question in the field has been one related to efficacy. Which program is more effective bilingual or ESL? A plethora of studies relating to the bilingual vs. ESL controversy have been conducted and published. Cziko (1992) found that the ERIC computerized database contained 921 bibliographic entries matching the descriptors "bilingual education, ESL and evaluation." This expansive data base includes "mega-evaluations" which examined and compared bilingual and ESL programs in many school districts across several states and geographic regions (Baker & deKanter, 1981; 1983; Collier & Thomas, 1995; Danoff, 1978; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey & Pasta, 1991; Rossell & Baker, 1996; Willig, 1985; Zappert & Cruz, 1977). It also includes evaluations, which were more focused on single school evaluations and classroom and instructional practices (Escamilla, 1992; Garcia,

1988; Medina & Escamilla, 1992; Tikunoff, 1985). Political issues and attitudes have most likely been the driving forces in the plethora of research and evaluation studies comparing ESL and bilingual programs.

Sadly, one of the unintended results of the constant comparison of ESL and bilingual approaches has been the creation of a false dichotomy between teachers and other educators in bilingual education programs, those in ESL programs, and even those in all English classrooms. A sense of division and competition has been created within a field of educators who should be collaborating and working as teammates. Effective bilingual education programs have always had solid ESL components in their structures, and have had the teaching of English as a major program component. Bilingual educators aspire for their students to become proficient in English and to become bilingual. On the other hand, ESL teachers often lament the fact that they are not able to communicate with their students in their native languages. They too aspire for their students to become proficient in English and to become bilingual as a result of the ESL program.

The focus of comparing bilingual education programs to ESL programs has diverted attention from the very important educational issues that all educators of CLD students face. It has limited honest conversations about program quality, teaching, and instruction for students who are the most numerous, the most under-served and the most disenfranchised of any of our school populations.

Transitional bilingual education and ESL programs have a great deal in common. In fact, the most serious educational issues that are impacting the achievement of all CLD students are issues that both transitional bilingual education programs and ESL programs share. About 98% of the CLD student population in the U.S. is either in an ESL program or in a transitional bilingual program (August & Hakuta, 1997). If our field is to move forward, it is time to refocus our discussions away from the rhetoric around the competition and false dichotomy between bilingual education and ESL programs and toward a focused consideration of educational issues that are negatively impacting teachers and students in both of these programs. This paper will discuss three of these educational issues.

An Inappropriate Paradigm: Language as a Problem

Ruiz (1988) discusses societal orientations toward language diversity. He suggests that there are three basic orientations toward language diversity. A society's orientation toward language diversity impacts language policy and planning in communities and schools. Language diversity orientations include: 1) language as a problem; 2) language as a right; and 3) language as a resource. The dominant paradigm around language diversity in the U.S. is the orientation language diversity is a problem.

For this discussion, it is important to separate what we say from what we do. Politicians, educators and others in the community openly claim to value linguistic diversity. In fact, schools and communities regularly plan events to "celebrate" diversity. Most of these events are conducted in English only. These same people develop educational programs for language minority students that are, for the most part, rooted in the paradigm that language diversity is a problem. Like other societal problems, the role of the school is to help students overcome their problems. In the case of CLD students, the problem is knowing a language other than English, and lack of proficiency in English. The role of ESL and transitional bilingual programs in this language orientation is to help students overcome their language problems by becoming proficient in English. Both programs are assimilationist in nature. Their purpose is to move CLD students into the mainstream dominant language and culture (Kjolseth, 1976).

The paradigm that language diversity is a problem permeates political debate, policy discussions, and pedagogical decisions with regard to CLD students. Political examples of this orientation abound. They include: 1) The passage of California's Proposition 227 (Crawford, 1997) which mandates that language minority students be mainstreamed into all English classes after 1 year of structured English immersion instruction. The one year of structured English immersion is meant to allow students time to overcome their "language problems"; 2) Denver's recent creation of an English Language Acquisition Program which replaces the former bilingual program (Denver Public Schools, 1998). The English Language Acquisition program emphasizes that the acquisition of English is the most important goal of school programs for CLD students. According to the district, knowledge of English is a prerequisite for academic success (1998); and 3) The proposed limit of participation in federally funded Title VII bilingual programs to three years (National Association for Bilingual Education, 1999). In this case, three years of instruction is considered sufficient time for students to become proficient in English. In three years, the problem of not knowing English should be eradicated.

Aside from politics, the paradigm that language is a problem permeates the implementation of ESL and transitional bilingual education programs. Consider, for example, identification criteria and student labels. CLD students are identified for ESL or transitional bilingual programs only if they are deemed to be limited English proficient (LEP). The LEP label signals a language problem (the student is not proficient in English). The LEP student enters a language program in order to remediate the perceived problem. A successful program transforms a LEP to a FEP (fluent English proficient) in three years or less. Methods of determining limited English proficiency vary by district and state. In most places, they include oral language as well as reading and writing criteria. In all cases, however, LEP labels signify language problems that the school needs to fix. Student proficiency in their native language and culture is seldom considered in the identification process.

The term limited English proficient (LEP) has often been criticized for its negative connotation and deficit perception (Crawford, 1995; Enright & McCloskey, 1988; Freeman & Freeman, 1998;). Several replacement terms have been suggested. These include:

1. SAE - Students Acquiring English (Tinajero & Ada 1993);
2. PEP - Potentially English Proficient (Hamayan, 1989);
3. REAL - Readers and Writers of English and Another Language (Rigg & Allen, 1989); and
4. ELL - English Language Learners (Freeman & Freeman, 1998; O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996; Peregoy & Boyle, 1997).

It has been argued that all of the suggested replacement terrns are more positive labels than the term LEP. However, as Crawford (1995) points out, although the replacement labels are less offensive than the term LEP, they are, at the same time, less precise in their definition. ELL, SAE, PEP and REAL all convey a single-minded focus on learning English that tends to restrict discussion about students' pedagogical needs and first language and cultural strengths. Crawford argues that the lack is precision with replacement labels is exactly the reason these terms are favored by many English Only advocates. All continue to support the language as a problem paradigm.

It is doubtful that effective educational programs can be created for CLD students in the current climate that views language diversity as a problem. Changing this paradigm will require going beyond the current school rhetoric about "celebrating diversity," and must involve bilingual and ESL educators working together. Radical changes are needed in the way that CLD students are labeled and discussed in schools and communities. As long as CLD students are defined in a unidimensional way around their perceived problems with English, they will continue to be viewed as problems to be solved instead of resources for schools and society.

Program Services: In Search of a Quick Fix

The notion that language is a problem to be remediated has resulted in a proliferation of quick-fix instructional programs. Quick-fix programs focus on issues related to student needs in the areas of second language acquisition, methods and assessment. They do not, however, situate these issues in social, political and economic contexts (Tollefson, 1995). They view the needs of CLD student as purely linguistic, and as such they are compatible with the language as a problem paradigm.

Quick-fix language programs seldom address issues related to program quality. They are designed to serve and exit students as quickly as possible. ESL and bilingual teachers often express the frustration that they are never asked how well they are doing their job, only how quickly. Program success is measured only minimally by academic progress. A major criterion for success is not academic progress, but how many students are exited out. By and large, both ESL and transitional bilingual programs are created to serve the least number of students for the shortest period of time.

Quick-fix programs fit nicely into the paradigm of language as a problem for they are created as places to remediate the language problems of CLD students. As sites of remediation, these classrooms are viewed as less desirable learning environments than all English classrooms. These programs are based on the following premises:

1. English language development should be the major goal of the instructional program for CLD students. English is all you need for school success.
2. CLD students must learn to "fit into" the dominant culture. Therefore, ESL and transitional bilingual programs should prepare students to succeed in all English classrooms; and
3. All English regular or mainstream classrooms are better learning environments than transitional bilingual or ESL classes. The goal is to mainstream students into all English classrooms.

There are many concerns that need to be raised with regard to quick-fix programs. First, they often underestimate the time it takes to become proficient in English. Best thinking in the field tells us that it takes from 3-5 years to become orally proficient in a second language and from 5-7 years to become academically proficient (Cummins, 1989; Collier & Thomas, 1995). This research has been well known for over 10 years. In spite of this knowledge, schools put great pressure on teachers and students to be exited out of language programs and into all English classes within three years. It is questionable that current quick-fix programs are sufficient, in duration, to enable students to meet even the primary program goal of becoming proficient in English. Recent studies by Fitzgerald (1995) and Cornell

(1995) document that CLD students frequently struggle in English reading and writing in all English classrooms after they have been exited from ESL and transitional bilingual programs.

The rhetoric of the quick fix programs ignores the fact that there is more to being successful in school than simple acquisition of English. Many monolingual English speakers struggle in school. CLD students often come to school with psychological, social and emotional needs as a result of their experiences as immigrants and refugees. Students and their families have many issues to face as they create lives in a new country. Many live in poverty, are homesick, and often feel confused about the expectations of American institutions, such as schools (Valdes, 1998). Bilingual and ESL teachers are often acutely aware of these issues. They state that they are not simply language teachers, they are counselors, cross-cultural mediators and support systems for their students.

There is no question that affective needs impact the school success and the English language development of CLD students in significant ways. Yet, there are few formal structures and even less encouragement for teachers to help students deal with non-language related issues. There are no quick fixes to address the pervasive affective educational issues that face the CLD student population. Honest educators cannot and should not pretend that there are. Early-exit, quick-fix programs often remove important, albeit informal, support systems from CLD students as they place them in English only mainstream classrooms.

Valdes (1998) asserts that the tragedy of the proliferation of quick-fix programs is that they frequently promise what they cannot deliver. They first suggest that academic success is a function of learning English, and that language acquisition is a psycholinguistic phenomenon. This ignores the fact that schools, as institutions, are value laden. Simply learning English will not give poor, culturally diverse students the cultural capital that is valued by schools, and that they need to be successful. Further, learning English will not eliminate or reduce the emotional and psychological issues that face many CLD students.

Bilingual and ESL teachers and educators have a responsibility to do more than preserve the status quo by simply implementing quick fix programs. Kaplan (1997) says that teachers of CLD students must begin to challenge and resist quick-fix programs. He says they can do this by refusing to:

5. Use intellectually impoverished materials;
6. To teach syllabi based on irrelevant assumptions about student needs;
7. To mislead their clients by telling them that English acquisition can solve all their problems.

No other educational program is based on the premise that less is better. Take for example programs for gifted and talented students. These programs never expect students to exit-out. Similarly, programs designed to make students more competent in math and science are not short-term in duration. They do not expect students to master the content area in three years or less. As with gifted and talented education, students do not exit out of math and science education. It is impossible to have productive discussions about best practice for CLD students in the current quick-fix educational climate.

There is little research to support the efficacy of quick fix programs either in ESL or transitional bilingual education. Yet, they are increasingly more common. They are great sources of frustration for both

bilingual and ESL teachers. It is imperative that we work together to engage schools and communities in dialogues about best practice rather than quick fixes.

Arrival at the Promised Land:
The English Only Mainstream Classroom

Quick-fix programs are problematic for CLD students. However, in these environments CLD students often make progress. In transitional bilingual education and ESL classrooms, CLD students feel comfortable taking risks, they trust their own abilities and persevere when learning is difficult (Nelson-Barber, 1998). Such is not the case when these students are transitioned to all English classrooms.

Teachers and school officials frequently report that they do well with beginning and intermediate level CLD students (often referred to as Levels 1 & 2). However, they begin to notice academic and social problems with more advanced (Level 3) students. In short, there appears to be a gap between knowledge and skills learned in transitional bilingual and ESL classrooms and expectations in all English mainstream classrooms. I would offer two observations on this predicament. First, if we were truly doing well with level 1 & 2 CLD students, then we would not be experiencing problems with level 3 students. Second, quick-fix programs are exiting students prematurely. The gap is a real, and the coordination between bilingual, ESL and all English classrooms merits further discussion.

So severe is the gap between bilingual, ESL and all English classes that the rate of referral for CLD students for special education and other compensatory programs quadruples after being exited from bilingual or ESL classrooms (Saunders, O'Brien, Lennon & McLean 1998). CLD students almost always struggle when they are exited from ESL and bilingual programs and ESL and bilingual teachers are almost always blamed for not preparing CLD students well.

All English mainstream or regular classrooms are espoused as being the best learning environments for all students. Yet, it is in these classrooms where they often struggle and fail (Cornell, 1995). CLD students are regularly rushed into all English classrooms, where it is hoped they will begin to achieve at rates that equal their English only peers. It is also hoped that CLD students will learn to interact successfully in the dominant American culture. Once exited, it is thought that language problems have been solved. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that all English classrooms are effective learning environments for CLD students (Fitzgerald, 1995).

The orientation that language is a problem once again plays out in the process of exiting CLD into all English programs. Once they are reassigned to all English classrooms, the few support systems they had completely disappear. They are expected to adjust, adapt and embrace life in an all English environment. Conversely, English only students and teachers in these classrooms are not expected to accommodate CLD students. The following examples illustrate this situation:

1. Teachers in transitional classrooms often have no special training in working with CLD students (Saunders, O'Brien, Lennon & McLean, 1998);

2. Reading instruction is often unspecified and is many times status quo English instruction (Saunders, O'Brien, Lennon & McLean, 1998);

3. Content area instruction is offered all in English with little or no accommodation for students whose English is still developing (Valdes, 1998);

4. There is no formal mechanism for closing the gap between what ESL and bilingual programs teach and what CLD students must know to be successful in all English classrooms. Mainstream English teachers do not pick up from where ESL and transitional bilingual teachers leave off. They expect students to have native like proficiency in English upon arrival in their classrooms (Escamilla & Garza, 1981).

5. There is no attempt to get white English speaking students ready to interact with CLD students. Teachers often complain that CLD students "stick together," and don't try to make English speaking friends. Seldom do they complain that English speaking students "stick together," and do not try to make friends with CLD students (Rotherman-Borus, Dopkins, Sabate, & Lightfoot, 1996).

6. Teachers of transitioned CLD students complain that CLDs continue to want to use their native language especially in informal school settings such as the cafeteria and playground. They complain that all the Spanish speakers sit together in the lunchroom and talk in Spanish. They seldom complain that all the English speakers sit together in the lunchroom and speak English.

In short, transitioned students are expected to have undergone a total linguistic and cultural metamorphosis prior to their arrival in English only mainstream classrooms. Such transformations are not only unlikely, they are not in the best interests of the CLD student, and certainly cannot be achieved in three years or less! Thus we see that, far from being a promise land, all English classrooms are often places where CLD students begin to fail, become angry and alienated, and quit trying. Why then are we in such as rush to place CLD students there?

The above comments are not meant to imply that mainstream English classroom teachers are uncaring or incompetent. They also have not been systematically included discussions of best practices for CLD students. In many cases, they have also not had any formal preparation in how to teach CLD students.

For English mainstream classrooms to be conducive learning environments for CLD students, the dominant group (students and teachers) has as much responsibility in learning new skills and changing stereotypical perceptions as the minority group does (Rotherman-Borus, Dopkins, Sabate, & Lightfoot, 1996). Current reality, however, places the entire burden for adjustment on the CLD student and none on the mainstream English teacher and students.

So entrenched are we in the notion that language is a problem that when transitioned students do not fare well in English only classrooms, we blame their parents for not valuing education or the students themselves for lacking motivation.

In view of the above, and pending a radical transformation of programs for CLD students, it is questionable that English mainstream classrooms are good environments for CLD students. It is ludicrous to assume or assert that these situations represent best practice for CLD students. In short, the underlying structures of CLD programs are seriously flawed. They are flawed from the theoretical orientation that language is a problem to the quick fix nature of ESL and transitional bilingual programs to the value that English only classrooms are better than ESL and bilingual education programs. The status quo is failing CLD children and frustrating caring and committed educators. It is a tragic problem we all share.

Closing Thoughts

Where does all of this leave us? Educators do not enjoy hearing stories or reading articles that are negative in tone. This article most assuredly is negative. Bilingual and ESL teachers often tell me that they are doing the "best they can" and that they are powerless in the face of a political and social climate that does not affirm diversity. I respectfully disagree. We are most assuredly working hard, but we are not doing our best. It is comforting to reassure each other that we are trying hard and that we have come a long way over the past 30 years. It is unlikely, however, that feeling good will create more equitable learning environments and a more just society for 8 million CLD students.

It is important for us to support each other as professionals. However, it is incumbent on us as ESL and bilingual teachers to raise the dialogue about educational opportunities for CLD students to a new level. We must not be afraid to challenge the status quo, that language is a problem and that quick-fix programs are best practice. We must not gloss over the stark reality that the more the CLD population grows, the fewer educational opportunities we provide. The rhetoric of the 90's asks us to provide best practice classrooms for all, and to hold all students to high standards. In this environment, it is utterly hypocritical to pretend that, for CLD students, less is more. Program structures for CLD students are mired in institutional racism, and we must not be afraid to say this.

There is no doubt that the persistent negativity and anti-imigrant paranoia will continue to influence the political and social context for schooling CLD students. Given this reality, educators of CLD students have a responsibility not only to create quality learning environments for our students, but to work to change the larger society that views these students and their families so negatively. Political and social systems do indeed influence individuals. However, individuals can influence and change systems. We must work together as educators of CLD students to transform classrooms and change systems. As the renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has."

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