ENGLISH - ESPAÑOL

THE FAILURE OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION AND THE PROPOSITION THAT WOULD MAKE THINGS WORSE

BY HOWARD BLUME & BEN EHRENREICH
Squeeze Play

California children are caught between a failed bilingual education program and a proposition that would make things worse

By Howard Blume and Ben Ehrenreich
Enrique Soberanes knows one particular spot on the floor of the principal’s office at Eastman Avenue Elementary School very well. It’s a tile circle covering a metal utility plate held in place by four brass screws. He knows the spot because, as an Eastman student during the early 70s, he used to stand in line there, waiting his turn to get paddled by the assistant principal for fighting on the playground, often with fellow Latino kids. He’d bounced him because he spoke little English. In seventh grade, he failed most of his classes, and he didn’t do much better in the first semester of eighth grade. In the L.A. of those days, most of the kids went on to do something similar in bilingual education, because his schools didn’t have it.

“I remember feeling like a second-class citizen,” said Soberanes. “I remember feeling inadequate, that I had to be as white as I could and still be accepted. It really does a job of self-esteem.”

Soberanes, 33, got turned around thanks to his mother, some dedicated teachers and his own hard work. He went on to study biochemistry at Occidental College, although for most of that time he still struggled in English. He would later edit science textbooks, before becoming a third-grade teacher. Despite his eventual success, Soberanes doesn’t tout the sin-on-sin approach.

“It’s a selfish cop-out that whatever worked for your English work for someone else,” he said, noting that you never hear from the people who pick. And many of his Latino classmates, he said, did just that. In the 1960s, the Latino dropout rate was estimated at more than 40 percent.

These days, Soberanes is back at Eastman, as the recently hired director of the East L.A. school’s bilingual program. His desk is two feet from the tile circle where he once stood waiting to get paddled. But the school is a very different place. Today, Eastman has a state-of-the-art bilingual-education program, one that Soberanes wishes had been available to him. In it, students with limited English-speaking skills receive most of their instruction, specifically for three to four years, in Spanish, the primary language for most of the school’s students. “I believe in bilingual education,” said Soberanes. “Bilingual education gives kids the basic building blocks for real achievement — not just enough English for survival, but real academic achievement in English.”

For years, programs like Eastman’s were widely accepted in the state as the best way to teach children lacking sufficient English skills. But now, the approach is on the verge of extinction in California. On June 2, state voters will almost certainly pass Proposition 227, an initiative that would fundamentally change the course of grade-school education in California. “Proposition 227 has forced a major reassessment of bilingual education as practiced in the state, and the resulting picture is deeply disturbing. Bilingual education has certainly been well-intentioned, and it’s worked for certain schools — the results have been entirely respectable. But even Eastman, with its model program, can only claim mixed results. By any objective standard, the state’s bilingual-education program has failed.”

The disaster’s roots go all the way back to the program’s California beginnings, when well-intentioned bureaucrats imposed a promising but proven formula for bilingual education, then taught schools how to follow it step by step. Although this prescription did some good by mandating the hiring of much-needed bilingual teachers and insisting on overdue cultural sensitivity, it fell short by never being expanded to accommodate the sheer demand for orthodoxy to the formula. And in the main, the state’s efforts never delivered results. Nowhere is that more clear than in L.A. Unified, which, by default, the nation’s premier working laboratory for bilingual education, with more than 320,000 students — 46 percent of the district’s enrollment — who aren’t fluent in English.

To explain just how bilingual education has worked in California, it’s important first to dispel some common misunderstandings. As mediated here, bilingual education is not at all what the term literally means. That is, it’s not at all “bilingual education” — which implies a primary goal of making children literate in two languages. Instead, it is a one-way road from a foreign language (usually Spanish) to the destination of English. Yet paradoxically, bilingual ed is not about teaching children to speak English as quickly as possible. Rather, the goal has been to promote academic achievement while steadily improving students’ language skills, however long that naturally takes.

You see the philosophy at work in the first-grade classroom of Eastman teacher Phyllis Zepeda, an 18-year veteran who obviously knows what she’s doing. On a recent Thursday, her class of 18 was divided into four quiet, happy and efficient groups, all with different tasks, such as writing thank-you letters, editing journals and illustrating poems they wrote for Mother’s Day cards. Students who finished early quietly strolled to the well-stocked, in-room library to thumb through books or mowed to other stations with neatly organized ed-toys.

Zepeda’s class is a virtual essay in good teaching, but it’s also almost entirely conducted in Spanish, even though most of these children have been at Eastman since kindergarten, for nearly two full years. The day’s grammar lesson, for example, is not about the use of pronouns like him or her, but about differences between masculine and feminine words like señor and señora. Although Zepeda seems in some instructions in English — because she knows the students understand them — the school’s program officially allows for only 50 minutes of formal English-language instruction.

At exactly 1:30 p.m., a singular phenomenon occurs. Zepeda sends three-fourths of her students to other classrooms, while at the same time, students from the rooms of two other teachers arrive at her door. Now, Zepeda will speak in English as much as possible, as she takes these children through an art, music or dance lesson. This part of the day is called “mixing,” and the idea is that you mix English and Spanish speakers together to promote the speaking of English while the teacher focuses on matters less strenuous than math or reading. Playground time and lunch also officially count as mixing, though the academic benefit of munching macaroni and playing dodge ball is hard to document.

But then, even the formal class-time mixing is a compromised process. After all, about 1,050 of the school’s 1,230 students are limited-English speakers, and most of the English speakers are concentrated in the upper grades. So there aren’t really enough designated English speakers to go around in the primary grades. But the school district says mix, so mix they do.

In this bilingual program, students are tested about once a year for fluency, with the goal of gradually introducing more English in the third, fourth and fifth grades. But actually becoming fluent in English could still theoretically take forever. It just happens when it happens, which, apparently, was perfectly okay with the state and many school districts until the last two or three years. Only recently did L.A. Unified establish loose time limits for how long it ought to take to learn English.

It is clear that most Eastman students are not learning English as quickly as they could. Take the alphabet displayed in another first-grade classroom. To illustrate the letter P, there’s a picture of a door (for puerta). The letter Q is demonstrated by a picture of cheese (queso). Wouldn’t it help the cause of learning English if, for example, the illustrated alphabet taught words in English rather than Spanish? Of course it would, but again, teaching English is not the point. Instead, the push is for academic achievement, because students who become literate in their native language will eventually make a smooth transition to English.

The question is, do they?
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Instruction in foreign languages continued to bear an unpatriotic taint, making even the few instances of bilingual education virtually disappear.

Then, in 1963, the Dade County, Florida, school system began an experimental bilingual program for children of the first wave of Cuban refugees to arrive there. The program, which aimed for complete bilingualism rather than just English mastery, was widely viewed as a success. By 1968, the federal government had started funding bilingual education grants to school districts across the country. Later revisions of the grant rules would explicitly require participating schools to offer native-language instruction.

Various California districts had run isolated pilot programs, but it was not until a series of court cases that the Legislature, in 1976, required school districts to offer classes in a student's primary language. By this time, positive results from nascent research had persuaded California policymakers that native-language instruction was the way to go.

In the years since, the weight of evidence has solidly favored bilingual ed, especially the basic notion that students benefit from transitional use of their first language while they learn English. Indeed, few in the academic or research community have doubted the notion. The debate was more over specific methods: "maintenance," which favors complete bilingualism after five to seven years, or "transitional," which allows its to a quick move to English within two or three years. In the political realm, however, the debate has devolved into an all-or-nothing contest between all-English and bilingual approaches. And within school districts, the goal of maintaining the primary language has been largely discarded, with the focus shifting to how long students should be taught in their native language.

Any canon of bilingual advocates usually includes the work of researchers Jim Cummins, Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas Cummins, and many others after them, who have argued that although children can quickly pick up enough English to get by on the playground, the fluency required for "academic proficiency" in English, i.e., for successful use in the classroom, requires a minimum of five years to develop. Collier and Thomas Cummins hypothesize, for example, that children are by teaching them in English. It's known in the jargon as the "time-on-task" approach, based on the idea that the more time spent on the task of teaching English, the better the results.

Porter cites the studies of researchers Christine Rossell and Keith Baker for support in arguing that English immersion is just as effective as teaching in the native language.

Rossell and Baker had indeed decided that immersion is a more effective way of promoting English reading skills. They based their conclusion on their own data, but on a 2006 review of 300 previously published studies. They concluded that all but 72 of these were methodologically flawed. Other researchers, using the same data, have reached a conclusion opposite to that of Rossell and Baker.

But even the work of Rossell and Baker does not point toward a Proposition 227-like solution, because they also find fault with the time-on-task theory, calling it unsupported by research. Moreover, they accept that there is some initial period of time when native-tongue instruction actually benefits students, opting for a brief period of first-language instruction, followed by a transition to English classes.

The approach in Proposition 227, by contrast, is both more extreme (using little or no native language) and more curtailed (limiting the immersion program to one year). Opponents of Proposition 227 make the case that such an intensive one-year program to teach English may have the practical effect of costing students a year of academic instruction. The current debate also has inspired a middle ground of pro-bilingual-ed pragmatists who've broken away from the hardcore academicists. These political leaders and educators, some of them Latino, have begun to flinch at the notion of fifth-graders still taking classes in Spanish after six years of "transition." The pragmatists, who include outgoing state Assembly Speaker Cruz Bustamante, some school board members and L.A. schools chief Ruben Zacarias, have begun to coalesce politically around a two-to-three-year maximum for native-language instruction, regardless of what the gurus claim.

And there's some reason to question the gurus, according to a review last year by the National Research Council. "What has happened in this area of research is that most consumers of the research are not researchers who want to know the truth, but advocates who are convinced of the absolute correctness of their positions," wrote the study's authors. "Because advocacy is the goal, very poor studies that support an advocated position are put out as definitive." Moreover, because there are studies that support a wide range of positions, advocates on both sides end up with plenty of evidence.

Despite this caveat, the research council concluded that, while "structured immersion" does offer benefits, providing some native-language instruction produces more clearly beneficial results. But even those positive benefits ascribed to structured immersion by the council don't apply to the program mandated by Proposition 227, which allows only one year for the process.

Some of the most compelling data on bilingual ed were collected in the 1980s at Eastman Elementary and four other California schools. The Eastman students showed small but statistically significant gains in English reading skills after the school's bilingual-ed program was ramped up under the leadership of state superintendent. The key features of the Eastman model include hiring a bilingual staff (and offering them regular training sessions), installing a complex and carefully structured bilingual program, and teaching academic subjects almost entirely in Spanish until the fourth grade, when the conversion to English is gradually made. Over time, this blueprint has begun to incrementally crush the opposition. Now the state Senate's Education Committee, as well as state educators, is moving forward with a bill to make Eastman-style bilingual programs the norm.

Ultimately, the National Research Council experts
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reached a point of enlightened futility in their review of existing research when it came to determining what works best. They concluded that there was, in fact, "little value in comparing educational models which type of program is best." There's not likely to be a one-size-fits-all approach, they said. In fact, "successful bilingual and immersion programs may contain many common elements." The focus should be on what is most likely to work in a particular local setting, and it's not to be said, to piece together elements from different approaches. Perhaps most notable of all the council's conclusions was that past studies fell short of the mark in answering vital questions about bilingual programs, leaving much of the basic research yet to be done.

In the late '70s, when California was coming out of the thrust to help non-native speakers, bilingual ed looked like the solution to the problem according to research then available. But more than that, the leadership at the state education department became of a philosophical bent to embrace new thinking. The state's Office of Education was left to educators and bureaucrats, most in their early 30s and fresh out of grad school, who were neither trained in nor passionate about bilingualism, who were in fact seen by language educators as a vehicle to deregulate the academic and social rescue of an entire generation of impoverished immigrant children who were speaking into their public schools.

The office was headed by Guillermo Lopez, a former teacher and one-time high school dropout who had worked his way up to a doctorate in education before becoming a school district administrator in Sacramento and moving on to the state bureaucratic ranks. As a student-activist, he had led three administrators who remained at the state ed official level to this day. Norm Ford, fresh from a year in Costa Rica with the Peace Corps and a doctoral program at the Universid-

ad. Misfortune struck. In 1980, the office's lead bilingual education director, John Perea, was removed as vice president of the Peace Corps, and the Peace Corps itself left the state. This was a golden age, recalled Krashen in an interview.

The atmosphere was like a high-level seminar universe. There was a lot of politics, of politics, of getting ahead.

It was, indeed, a heady era, marked by the free exchange of ideas, but it also was more about concepts and good will than hard science. Many of these same academics were spouting traditional notions about reading and math instruction, making policy decisions that became highly controversial. Since bilingual education was still coming into being, this area became a natural home for these new teaching methods and theories. But the biggest decision was to push for a program rooted in primary-language instruction.

The revolutionary nature of the approach encompassed more than just trendy pedagogy. Prior to the push for bilingual education, school districts across the state practiced what can only be characterized as institutional racism. Latino students were frequently segregated from Anglo students, provided unequal resources and tracked unreasoningly in advanced and factory jobs. Then, suddenly, in nothing less than a second-wave civil rights movement, school districts were told that they not only had to start educating Latinos, but they had to do it in their own language.

"Many school districts resisted providing any special help to students who spoke limited English," said Dennis Parker, a program coordinator for the state. "Or they would fail to identify those in need of help or refuse to make a serious effort to hire or train bilingual teachers. For the most part, however, in the mid-80s school districts stopped asking why and started asking how they could best serve these students.

There was still a potent political backlash, namely, a latent English-only movement that spurred then-Governor George Deukmejian to veto an extension of the state's bilingual-education legislation, which officially expired in 1987. English-only advocates thought they had killed off bilingual education, but not so. The state education department cited both case law and the fine print of the expired laws to continue enforcement of the law.

And enforcing the rules is what the state bilingual-education division does best. The state's mandate has been adroitly one requiring school districts to identify every student who's not fluent in English and to provide a primary-language teacher for that student for two years or more. Even cooperative school districts have had to play perpetual catch-up to hire the needed teachers.

At least 90 percent of limited-English students receive some special services, only 30 percent of the state's 1.4 million limited-English students are in classrooms that meet state specifications, that is, classes taught by a fully certificated teacher using the primary language of the student.

This teacher shortage remains a key point in the arsenal of bilingual educators, who've singled out the lack of resources and bilingual teachers as a principal reason for the failure to teach English to limited-English students.

And there's a point. In L.A. Unified, 42 percent of the bilingual teachers have not completed their teacher training and are working with emergency credentials. Compare that to the rest of the state--the number is 8 percent. The students who couldn't achieve the ideal that was all of them, really had to show the state they were so bad, and the mandated requirement was a good thing. There was little room for argument and little thought about bilingual options that might be less ambitious, but perhaps more successful in the bargain.

That department is a true-believer department," said former state schools Superintendent Bill Honig in an interview.

"The bilingual department has been focused on providing services to students with limited proficiency in English. But sometimes the limited information or the language difficulties create a barrier for students who are already struggling because of poverty, lack of motivation or other factors. And that's where the bilingual department can really make a difference." But Honig's department was focused on helping students who were already in trouble, and bilingual education was seen as a way to help them recover their abilities.

But at its core, the debate over the pace of English fluency presents a false dilemma. Over time, bilingual programs generally succeed at the goal of producing English speakers. While one could argue that the transition should come earlier and that students could learn more English faster--no student who spends 12 years in L.A. Unified emerges unable to speak conversational English--the problem is that you'll find lots of students, in and out of bilingual ed. whose academic achievement, as measured by test scores, is abysmal. Except in selected cases, bilingual education hasn't resulted in literate, well-educated students, and, remember, academic achievement rather than learning English quickly has been the real goal of the state's bilingual-education program all along. Moreover, the Latino dropout rate is still at least 30 percent.

There are some legitimate explanations for student poverty, parents' lack of literacy, and a shortage of bilingual teachers, but not to mention student transience. And perhaps spending in California lags behind most of the nation. But that is not the whole story.

Former state Superintendent Honig noted that for years there were no serious discussions at the state level on tracking the progress of students--bilingual or otherwise--in order to hold local school districts accountable, a failing that hampered the entire public school system. In its good faith attempt to provide extra funding to help bilingual students, the state even created a penalty for success. As a result, schools that showed improvement were at risk of losing supplemental funding, about $254 per student in LAUSD last year. Honig also made the case that effective bilingual education was undermined by the same teaching strategies that he and others criticized for plumping reading scores in English-only classes: the once-popular "whole language" methods.

Whole language, as it came to be widely practiced, relied on an almost magical acquisition of reading skills, the idea being that if children were surrounded with rich literature, they would naturally absorb intuitively the skills necessary to read. In the whole-language make-over of classrooms, old-fashioned, often tedious "See Jane run" readers got tossed on the dust heap. In many instances, administrators even banned the use of phonics, the process of decoding words by learning the sounds made by letters.

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In theory, whole language was not all bad. In practice, its rapid introduction left many teachers with neither materials nor techniques to teach children how to read. Not only did whole language supplant phonics in the 1980s, but it also left its mark on bilingual education. For example, at least in California, thanks to the influence of charismatic academics such as Stephen Krashen, whose ideas were fervently adopted by many educators, there was an emphasis on teaching students to read and write in the target language from the start.

But the issue is not purely a pedagogical one. In California, the vast majority of English learners are Latino. Many vividly recall the not-too-distant bad old days before bilingual education, when children were punished or denied the right to speak Spanish. They therefore may be even more eager to see bilingual education continue.

Bilingual education has done more for the self-esteem of kids in this common bin than anything else," said Soberanes, the bilingual coordinator at Eastman. And both research and common sense support the notion that children learn more effectively in a culturally supportive environment.

In the domain of cultural affirmation, educators have largely succeeded, by celebrating students’ diverse backgrounds and elevating Spanish and those who speak it from a second or third place to a full-fledged recognized language. The emphasis on students’ self-image (“self-confidence” is one of the main goals of L.A. Unified’s bilingual plan) has not translated into concrete results. In fact, bilingual programs have become a sort of curricular equivalent of Black History Month, emphasizing culture and self-esteem, and then declaring the battle won.

But as educators began to press for reforms, the bilingual establishment—and Latino political leaders—resisted. Some of this misdirected recalcitrance was certainly principled, but special-interest politics also entered the fray. The state spends about $331 million a year on bilingual ed, and many millions more go into the pipeline from general-education funds due to the sheer numbers of limited-English speakers. In recent years, the Latino caucus in the Legislature had enough clout to shoot down bilingual reform in Sacramento, legislation that could have prevented Proposition 227 from ever taking shape.

There are unquestionably bilingual-education programs that work, but the examples are more readily apparent in research than in real life. Even in Eastman, the results are equivocal. Eastman fourth-graders tested in Spanish outscored other district students who were tested in Spanish. They even exceeded national averages in some categories when compared with other limited English, Spanish-speaking students. But these children in English, and a different picture emerges. The scores of Eastman fourth-graders, many of whom have been bilingual for six or more years, were disappointingly low. Where a rank of 50 is the national average, Eastman students received a 15 in reading, a 21 in math, a 22 in language and a 9 in spelling. There’s no data available to answer whether these students’ scores would rebound in later years, after longer exposure to English.

Assessing bilingual education is even more difficult because of shoddy record keeping, oversight and analysis. L.A. Unified, for example, has concentrated its limited internal oversight on the front end of the bilingual program, on identifying students with limited English skills and getting them into a program. Once students were enrolled, the district’s attempts to determine whether that education was appropriate was individualized. Student data was limitedly monitored, but little has been done to take stock of group results. After all, the state ed department has already determined what it is and what doesn’t.

The school system never even bothered to follow the evaluation directives of its 1988 “Master Plan” for bilingual education, which promised that “data will be available for individual students and groups of students progressing through the various bilingual programs” and that “students’ academic performance will be compared with that of their English-speaking peers.”

In the end, the data made available by the district does not necessarily prove what it is purported to. Take the results of an internal study released with some fanfare in 1992. According to the study, students in native-language programs had higher test scores in English than similar students who’d learned in English. The study compared students who’d been in the same school from kindergarten through fifth grade, identifying 8,939 students who took core course work mainly in Spanish and 5,630 students with classes mainly in English. Sure enough, those in the English-language classes had fared worse.

Or had they?

In its analysis of the test scores, the school district absolutely excluded 56 percent of the students in the Spanish-language-based program and 37 percent of those in the English program. Why? Because the district decided to reclassify all students who were not fluent in English. Thus, after six years in the district’s primary bilingual program, more than half of its students aren’t fluent enough to take an achievement test in English. By that parameter, the students who were reclassified did just as well, if not better, but their performance was hardly comforting.

Even if you accept the district’s positive spin on the selected test scores themselves, a glaring reality emerges. The fact is that if you talk about kids in bilingual education doing a little better than kids in English-only programs, it’s a matter of perspective. We’re talking about kids who speak English below basic proficiency levels, below national norms. The truth is that they’re still doing miserably except the kids who are tracked to go to college. And that gap is getting bigger.

All told, it’s hard to imagine Proposition 227 losing when polls show the measure solidly favored by both Anglos and Latinos. Even English teachers, who, by logic, would support the system in which they work, are deeply divided. In a November referendum, teachers opposed Proposition 227 by only a 52 percent to 48 percent margin.

There are some alternatives. The Legislature finally passed a bill allowing school districts flexibility to design local bilingual programs. The bill also established some performance standards. That could have a beneficial effect. But according to a recent report by the 조회용, the bilingual-ed programs at L.A. Unified show promise.

Despite that, a movement to set achievement standards continues to slowly gain steam, though it’s way too soon to measure its impact. Locally, L.A. Unified softened the success penalty for English fluency by providing, for the first time, a financial reward to schools that create fluent English speakers. The district’s software is an improvement, except that the District Superintendent, Pete Wilson vetoes the bill, then also announced his endorsement of Proposition 227.

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Proposition 227, on the other hand, would re-create the same kind of harmful rigidity that defined the state program. And no research offers support for the idea that in one year, children can learn all the English they need to succeed in school.

The truth is that the problem was never bilingual education, but an entire education system that hasn’t delivered. The obvious remedies include better managed, accountable programs run by talented, inspired teachers—whether the emphasis be on English immersion, native language or something else for that matter. Transylvanian falconry. Nevertheless, on June 2, the measure to make bilingual education the scapegoat of the moment, and ensnare the state in a new education nightmare. Researchers Jade Chang and Greg Brown contributed to this story.