

How much do parents know about bilingual education and immersion? Reasons for optimism

Augustine Garcia and Stephen Krashen
Multilingual Matters (in press)

Do those with more positive attitudes toward bilingual education know more about it? If they do, it is cause for optimism: It suggests that if we can inform the public of the facts about bilingual education, we have a chance of regaining lost ground.

In this study, we present some reason to be optimistic. We asked two groups of parents of limited English proficient children if they understood some of the basic differences between "structured English immersion" and bilingual education. One group of parents had opted for bilingual education, that is, they requested waivers that would allow their children to stay in bilingual education programs after the passage of Proposition 227. The other group did not request waivers.

Subjects were 360 parents of limited English proficient children in three school districts with high numbers of Spanish-speaking limited English learners in different parts of California (see Garcia, 2000, for additional details).

Subjects were questioned in an interview situation. We present here only a part of the results (for additional details and discussion, see Garcia, 2000). As presented in table 1, parents who requested waivers were somewhat better informed about the nature of both bilingual and immersion programs than were parents who did not request waivers: they had a clearer understanding that Prop. 227 generally allowed only one year of immersion before mainstreaming (question 2), that children in bilingual programs first learn to read in the primary language (question 3), and that bilingual programs utilize sheltered subject matter teaching (question 4).

Table 1: Knowledge of details of bilingual education and immersion

	Immersion	Bil. Ed.	
1. In a structured English immersion program, children are expected to learn to read in English without first learning to read in their native language.	2.77 (1.22)	2.95 (1.27)	
2. Normally, students in structured English immersion programs will be moved to regular classrooms after just one year.	2.54 (1.21)	2.28 (1.07)	*
3. In a bilingual program, children learn to read in Spanish first, then English.	2.03 (.99)	1.56 (.64)	*
4. Once students in a bilingual program begin to master English, they are taught subject matter in English through special methods which use simple English.	2.13 (1.06)	1.83 (.83)	*

1 = Strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree
 standard deviations in parentheses
 *= difference statistically significant

It must be pointed out, however, that a substantial number of subjects in both groups were uninformed. There was only mild overall disagreement with the statement that children in immersion do not learn to read in their first language (question 1), and many parents were unaware that under Prop. 227 immersion allows only one year before mainstreaming (question 2); parents who preferred immersion were actually neutral on this question (mean = 2.54).

The responses to an open-ended question, "what is the best way to acquire English?" are presented in table 2.

As expected, more parents who chose bilingual education supported bilingual education, but a surprising 24.5% of the immersion parents also supported it. Also, more immersion parents felt that "easing into English" was a good idea, an idea associated with bilingual education. Even more surprising is the fact that 21% of the parents opting for bilingual education felt that "submersion" was the best way to acquire English.

Table 2: What is the best way to acquire English?

	Immersion	Bil. Ed.	
Submersion	23.80%	20.70%	
Ease into English	36.70%	18%	*
Reading in English	7.50%	4.70%	
Homework/Study in English	0.70%	9.30%	*
Bilingual Instruction	24.50%	46%	*
Other	6.80%	1.30%	*

* = difference statistically significant
immersion = did not request waiver
bilingual education = requested waiver

It is quite possible that those bilingual education parents who preferred immersion and those immersion parents who preferred bilingual education made their choice of program on the basis of factors other than pedagogy, such as a favorite teacher or convenience.

Conclusions

Parents who opted for bilingual education had a clearer idea of what different program options were, indicating that they made a more informed choice than parents who did not request waivers. Although there is evidence suggesting that some parents did not make their choices based on pedagogy, these results are consistent with the hypothesis that those who know more are more supportive of bilingual education.

This data provides hope for the future of bilingual education: Public opinion about bilingual education could improve when people know more about it, and when they know more about alternative programs (see Crawford, Krashen, and Kim, 1998, for

similar conclusions).

In addition to continuing to establish quality programs and demonstrating their effectiveness, bilingual educators need to do a better job educating the public.

Garcia, A. 2000. Informed parent consent and Proposition 227. *Bilingual Research Journal* 24, (1,2): 57-74

Krashen, S., Crawford, J. and Kim, H. 1998. Bias in polls on bilingual education: A demonstration.

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/USCpoll.htm>