

Ten Common Fallacies about Bilingual Education*

Since 1968, when the Bilingual Education Act was passed, researchers have made considerable advances in understanding second-language acquisition. We now know a great deal more about the challenges faced by English language learners (ELLs) and about promising strategies for meeting these challenges. Yet one such strategy, bilingual education, remains a subject of considerable controversy. Although a growing body of research points to its benefits, there are several commonly held beliefs about language acquisition, academic learning, and bilingualism that run counter to scientific findings. What follows is an attempt to address some of these fallacies.

Fallacy 1: English is losing ground to other languages in the United States

It's fair to say that more languages are spoken in the United States today than at any time in our history. But linguistic diversity per se is nothing new; it was at least as common in the Colonial period and more so during the 19th century. As minority language groups proliferated, about a dozen states and territories passed laws authorizing bilingual instruction. In both parochial and public schools, children learned in languages as diverse as French, Norwegian, Czech, and Cherokee. By 1900, there were at least 600,000 elementary school students, about 4% of the US total, receiving part or all of their instruction in German (Kloss, 1998). Yet English thrived – indeed, it became overwhelmingly dominant – without any help from language-restrictionist legislation.

Fallacy 2: Newcomers to the United States are learning English more slowly now than in previous generations

To the contrary, today's immigrants appear to be acquiring English more rapidly than in the past. While the population of minority-language

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speakers is projected to increase well into the next century, thanks to immigration and fertility patterns, the population of fluent bilinguals is increasing even faster. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of US residents who spoke non-English languages at home increased by 59%, while the members of this group who spoke English 'very well' rose by 93% (Waggoner, 1995). After 15 years in this country, about three in four Hispanic immigrants use English on a daily basis, while 70% of their children become dominant or monolingual in English (Veltman, 1988).

Fallacy 3: The best way to learn a language is through 'total immersion'

There is no scientific evidence to support the 'time on task' theory of language acquisition, the claim that the more children are 'immersed' in English, the more English they will learn. Studies have shown that what counts is not just the quantity, but the quality of exposure. That is, second-language input must be *comprehensible* in order to promote second-language acquisition (Krashen, 1996). If students are left to sink or swim in mainstream classrooms, with little or no help in understanding their lessons, they won't learn much English. On the other hand, if native-language instruction is used to make lessons meaningful, they will acquire more English and more subject matter knowledge as well.

Fallacy 4: Students are retained too long in bilingual classrooms, at the expense of English acquisition

In fact, research shows that time spent learning in well-designed bilingual programs is learning time well spent, especially in programs that build on the linguistic foundation children bring to school (Ramírez *et al.*, 1991). Knowledge and skills acquired in the native language, literacy in particular, are 'transferable' to a second language. They do not need to be relearned in English (Krashen, 1996; Cummins, 1992). Thus there is no reason to rush ELL students into the mainstream before they are ready; indeed, such practices can be harmful.

Research over the past two decades has determined that, despite appearances, attaining full proficiency in a second language is an extended process. Children are often quick to learn the conversational English used on the playground, but normally they need several years to acquire the cognitively demanding, decontextualized language used for academic pursuits (Collier & Thomas, 1989).

Bilingual education programs that emphasize a gradual transition to English, using native-language instruction in declining amounts over time, provide continuity in children's cognitive growth and lay a basis for

academic success in the second language. By contrast, English-only approaches and quick-exit bilingual programs can interrupt that growth at a crucial stage, with negative effects on achievement (Cummins, 1992).

Fallacy 5: Schools are providing bilingual instruction in scores of native languages

This claim, popularized by English-only enthusiasts, has no basis in fact; it simply does not happen. Where children speak a number of different languages, there are rarely sufficient numbers from each language group to make bilingual instruction practical for everyone. In any case, the shortage of qualified teachers in most of the less commonly taught languages usually makes that impossible. In 1994, California enrolled recently arrived immigrants from 136 different countries, but bilingual teachers were certified in only 17 languages, 96% of them in Spanish (California Department of Education, 1995a).

Fallacy 6: Bilingual education means instruction mainly in students' native tongue, with little instruction in English

Untrue. Before passage of the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA; 1994), the vast majority of bilingual education programs in the USA sought to encourage an early transition to mainstream English-language classrooms, while only a tiny fraction were designed to maintain the native tongues of students.¹ In addition, a majority of so-called 'bilingual' programs teach a substantial portion of the curriculum in English. According to a nationwide survey of elementary schools, about a third of ELLs in such classrooms receive more than 75% of their instruction in English; a third receive from 40 to 75% in English; and a third receive less than 40% in English. Secondary-school students are much less likely to be instructed in the native language than younger ELLs (Hopstock *et al.*, 1993).

Fallacy 7: Bilingual education is far more expensive than English-only instruction

All programs serving ELL students, regardless of the language of instruction, require additional staff training, instructional materials, and administration. So any pedagogical option other than 'submersion' (a fancy label for total neglect) can be expected to cost more than the regular program provided to fluent English speakers. A study commissioned by the California legislature in the late 1980s (Chambers & Parrish, 1992) examined a variety of well-implemented program models for ELLs and found no budgetary advantage for English-only approaches. The incremental cost was about the same each year for bilingual education and for

all-English immersion (\$175–\$214), as compared with a much higher figure for the English-as-a-second-language (ESL) ‘pullout’ model (\$1198). The reason was simple: pullout programs require supplemental teachers, whereas in-class approaches normally do not (Chambers & Parrish, 1992). Nevertheless, ESL pullout remains the method of choice for many school districts, especially where ELL students are diverse, bilingual teachers are in short supply, or expertise is lacking in bilingual methodologies.

Fallacy 8: Disproportionate dropout rates for Hispanic students demonstrate the failure of bilingual education

Hispanic dropout rates remain unacceptably high. Research has identified multiple factors associated with this problem, including recent arrival in the United States, family poverty, limited English proficiency, low academic achievement, and being retained in grade (Lockwood, 1996). No credible studies, however, have identified bilingual education among these risk factors. Indeed, some research suggests that native-language programs reduce students’ likelihood of dropping out (Curiel *et al.*, 1986). Moreover, bilingual education touches only a small minority of Hispanics. Just 17% of California’s Hispanic students were in bilingual classrooms last year, before passage of the state’s English-only initiative (California Department of Education, 1997a).

Fallacy 9: Research is inconclusive on the benefits of bilingual education

Some academic researchers argue that position, but they speak for a very small minority. The most prominent critics, Rossell and Baker (1996), examined 300 bilingual program evaluations and judged only 72 to be methodologically acceptable. Of these primary studies, they reported, a mere 22% supported the superiority of transitional programs over all-English instruction in reading, 9% in math, and 7% in language. Moreover, their review concluded that transitional bilingual education ‘is never better than structured immersion’ in English (p. 7). In other words, the researchers could find little evidence that bilingual education works.

But a close analysis of Rossell and Baker’s work reveals some serious flaws of their own. Krashen (1996) questioned the rigor of several studies the reviewers included as methodologically acceptable, all of which were unfavorable to bilingual education and many were not published in the professional literature. In addition, Rossell and Baker relied heavily on program evaluations from the 1970s, when bilingual pedagogies were considerably less developed. Compounding these weaknesses was their narrative review technique, which simply ‘counts the votes’ for or against a

program alternative, a method that leaves considerable room for subjectivity and reviewer bias (Dunkel, 1990).

Meta-analysis, a more objective method that weighs numerous variables in each study under review, has yielded positive findings about bilingual education (e.g. Willig, 1985). Using meta-analysis to review most of the same studies that Rossell and Baker examined,² Greene (1998) drew the opposite conclusion: a modest edge for programs featuring native-language instruction.

Perhaps the most important weakness of the Rossell and Baker (1996) review was that it simply compared program labels, with little consideration of pedagogical details (Krashen, 1996). Thus it treated as equivalent all approaches called 'transitional bilingual education' or 'structured immersion,' even though many primary studies featured only vague program descriptions. Researchers who take the time to visit real classrooms understand how dangerous such assumptions can be. According to Hopstock et al. (1993), 'When actual practices ... are examined, a bilingual education program might provide more instruction in English than ... an "English as a second language" program.' Programs vary considerably in how languages are integrated into the curriculum and into the social context of the school. It's also important to remember that bilingual, ESL, and immersion techniques are not mutually exclusive; successful programs often make use of all three (see, e.g. Ramírez *et al.*, 1991).

Even when program descriptions were available, Rossell and Baker (1996) sometimes ignored them. For example, the authors classified a so-called 'bilingual immersion program' in El Paso as 'submersion,' although it included 90 minutes of Spanish instruction each day in addition to sheltered lessons in English.³ The researchers also included in their review several studies of French immersion in Canada, which they equated with all-English, structured immersion programs in the United States. As the Canadian program designers have repeatedly stressed (e.g. Lambert, 1984), the French immersion models are bilingual in both methods and goals, and they serve students who differ substantially from English learners in this country.

Fallacy 10: Language-minority parents do not support bilingual education because they feel it is more important for their children to learn English than to maintain the native language

Naturally, when pollsters place these goals in opposition, immigrant parents will opt for English by wide margins. Who understands the importance of learning English better than those who struggle with language barriers every day? But the premise of such surveys is false. Truly bilingual

programs seek to cultivate proficiency in both tongues, and research has shown that students' native language can be maintained and developed at no cost to English. When the principles underlying bilingual education are explained, for example, that literacy development in the first language facilitates literacy development in English, strong majorities of Hispanic and Asian parents favor such approaches (for a review of this research, see Krashen, 1996).

Notes

1. For the first time, IASA gave priority in awarding competitive grants to instructional approaches that sought to cultivate bilingualism and biliteracy. While the number of developmental bilingual programs increased as a result, they were still vastly outnumbered by transitional bilingual programs.
2. The main difference was that Greene excluded studies of foreign programs, which are not directly comparable to those in the United States.
3. Elsewhere Baker has characterized the El Paso model as 'a bilingual program' (1997: 6) and as 'structured English immersion' (1998: 201), further clouding the issue.