

ESL Teaching and Learning Background in the United States of America

Ekaterine PIPIA

Abstract

This article identifies dramatic demographic changes in the United States with particular emphasis on shifts in the ethnic composition of school-age children. In this study, nearly one of every five American students entering school is a native speaker of a language other than English. In addition, the paper explores ESL background of the United States and many facets of the most commonly implemented bilingual program designs in today's American schools: pull-out, structured immersion, transitional, maintenance, and dual language. Since these policies and programs are not related to any socio-cultural matters, the paper provides a socio-cultural and historical background of language contact and attitudes out of which these programs grew and that each, of course, reflects.

Key words: ethnic groups, second language, bilingual education programs

Ekaterine Pipia is a coordinator of the English Language Program of School of Languages of International Black Sea University

Introduction

Recent political and policy initiatives have brought about dramatic shifts in policies for educating language minority children and bilingual education programs in the United States. These policy shifts are caused by struggles over social dominance among cultural and ethnic groups within the larger society. The ideology of cultural and linguistic assimilation and the relative power and status of speakers of different world languages among mainstream, immigrant, and minority populations have spawned conflicting social and political agendas that play themselves out in reform initiatives in the public schools. Bilingualism and bilingual education in the United States became the subject of renewed controversy as schools felt the impact of increasing immigration to the United States.

American way of ESL

Throughout the paper I have chosen to use the term English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) student over the former terminology of limited English proficient (LEP) student, or the more recently coined term English Language Learner (ELL), because the former term has achieved continuity and stability in the research and applied fields serving this population. The term ESL students has become classic and conveys that the student is in the process of learning English without connoting that the student is in some way deficient until full English proficiency is attained. Out of 270 million Americans today, about 100 million are descended from at least one ancestor who has an ESL background and immigrated within the last 120 years (NCES 98036). Currently, ESL students are present in over 42 % of all school districts in the United States. Moreover, 20% of all public school teachers have at least one ESL student in their classroom, who is not fluent enough in English to complete most of the assigned work (NCES, 2002). Kindler (2002) has reported that ESL enrollment levels in the United States continued to increase in 2000-2001, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the total student enrollment. She estimates that 4, 584, 946 ESL students were enrolled in public schools, representing approximately 9.6% of the total school enrollment of students in the nation (47,665,483) in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 (NCES, 2002). Over 67% of all ESL students were enrolled at the elementary level, where they accounted for 11.7 % of the total school enrollment. The reported number of ESL students

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enrolled grew by 3.8 % from the 1999-2000 school years, and their representation as a percentage of total school enrollment increased by 3.1%. California has the largest number of ESL students enrolled in public schools and represents one third of the national ESL students' enrollment with 1,511,646, followed by Puerto Rico (598,063), Texas (570,517), Illinois (140,528), and Arizona (135,248). California alone represents one fourth of the total national ESL students' enrollment. The states with the highest percentages of total enrollment of ESL students are California (25%), New Mexico (19.9 %), Arizona (15.4%), Alaska (15%), Texas (14%) and Nevada (11.8%).

There are 460 languages spoken by ESL students nationwide. Spanish is the first language of the great majority of ESL students (79.2%), followed by Vietnamese (2%), Hmong (1.6%), Cantonese (1%) and Korean (1%). All other groups each represented less than 1% of the ESL students' population. Languages with more than 10,000 speakers include Arabic, Armenian, Chuukese, French, Haitian Creole, Japanese, Khmer, Lao, Mandarin, Marshallese, Navajo, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Tagalog, and Urdu. ESL students identified as “Chinese” and “Native American” also numbered over 10,000 each. (NCES, 2002).

Table 1. ESL Student Population Changes in Five States: 1991-1992 and 2001-2002

STATE	1991-1992	2001-2002	TOTAL
Georgia	7, 955	61,307	671%
North Carolina	7, 026	52, 835	652%
Nebraska	1,856	12,451	571%
South Carolina	1,466	7,004	378%
Tennessee	2,636	12,422	371%

In 2001-2002 more than one out of every ten ESL students was determined to possess the English proficiency to participate fully in the regular all-English, mainstream program. States and districts relied on several methods and tests to assess a student's readiness to enter the regular all-English program. Reclassification rates vary by grade. Rates are lowest in Grades K-2 and in Grade 9 when ESL students are entering school systems and may have little or no experience with Academic English. Rates

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are highest in Grades 3 and 5. States with high classification rates of 15 % or more include Hawaii, Iowa, Kansas, New Jersey, New Mexico and Virginia. States with low classification rates of 5% or less include Idaho, Mississippi, Montana, Oklahoma, Vermont, West Virginia and Wisconsin. The variability of assessment measures used by states make it difficult to interpret available data and impossible to make a cross-state comparison. Since states only conduct assessments in selected grades and are not required to specify which grades are tested, it's impossible to define the ESL population eligible for assessment. Based on the research, approximately 45% ESL students are tested in English and 4.3 % are tested in the native language. Only 18.7 % of the ESL students assessed scored above the state-established norm in English Reading Comprehension. Of the 13 states that were able to report on ESL students' success in native language reading comprehension assessments, 57.4% of ESL students assessed scored above the state-established norm. Commonly used tests administered to assess English reading comprehension were the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) and Terra Nova. Three states reported native language reading comprehension tests: Spanish LAS and Spanish Assessment of Basic Education (SABE). States also reported they used state-designed tests. It's note-worthy to point out that 22.7 % of ESL students are receiving native language instruction compared to 54% of ESL students receiving English-only instruction. As expected, the use of the native language for instruction is most frequently incorporated at the early elementary levels with English becoming most prevalent in the upper elementary and secondary schools.

The language distribution and contact in North America corresponding roughly to the geographical boundaries of the United States from the initial stages of European immigration through the present would look something like the following:

1. We would see a stage of intrusive European language communities – English, Spanish, French, Dutch, and so on- during the 17th and 18th centuries in contact with American Indian languages in various, often widely separate, locations.

2. We would late see the stage from the 18th through the 19th centuries, during the first part of which English becomes the national

language of the newly formed political entity occupying the Eastern seaboard and extending increasingly inland. During this period we can see three important processes occurring:

a) The American Indian languages in contact with English continue to disappear from an ever expanding area. Most simply cease to be spoken, though a few, like Cherokee, move westward to escape the inevitable results of the contact

b) Formation continues on a large scale of what is to become the only major variant of English, Black English. The emergence of Black English can be observed throughout the southern half of the United States.

c) A third process taking place during this time is the gradual yielding of other European language communities to the pervasiveness of English as those communities become increasingly incorporated into the U.S. government. This process can be seen in areas such as Florida, the southern parts of the Louisiana Purchase, and the Dutch speaking portions of New York.

3. A new kind of contact situation intensifies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries between established communities of English speakers and groups of newly arrived speakers of other languages – Norwegian, Italian, German, Swedish, Polish, Yiddish, Chinese, Japanese, and so on. In these cases we can see initially non-English monolingualism usually shifting to one-and-a-half generational bilingualism and finally to English monolingualism. However, the language of certain groups of immigrants (e.g. Chinese speakers and some Yiddish speakers), who had continuous migration and a localized community; remain in a stage of rather more stable bilingualism.

4. The westward expansion of the late 19th century continues the eradicating contacts with American Indian languages and brings new contact with older, long-established communities of Spanish speakers of the West and the Southwest.

5. The continued end present influx of immigrants from Asia and Latin America has continued to flow rapidly to almost all states.

Thus currently, we have not one, but a large number of different social processes reflected in the various bilingual situations extant in the

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United States:

- The English-Black English contact situation
- The contact with the remaining American Indian Language communities
- Contact situations such as the English-Spanish or English-Chinese contact in which the nonofficial language is represented by a long history within the United States and in which there is a wide range of dialects and speech styles in which each is spoken.
- The current contact situation between and among immigrants from Latin America speakers of Spanish and English is widely scattered geographical areas.

We have seen that historically in U.S. (the American) society there has been an almost entirely one-way dominance of English in language use. This may be due at least three factors:

1. There has been great sensitivity toward language use; that is, there is no casualness toward which language one uses in the United States. It's very important to speak the "proper" language.

2. This attitude has been supported by the feeling that there is only one acceptable language –English. Monolingualism is accepted as a normal situation in the United States. Being a non-English speaker in the U.S. society has meant socially being not quite as acceptable as the native-English speakers.

3. There is, and has been historically, almost no structural effect on English of the various languages involved in the different kinds of contact situations just described.

The table below illustrates the ethnic categories of U.S. society and the language identities corresponding to those categories. It describes the position or thinking about the relation of language to the nature of the social-person. The first column lists some of the terms for socio ethnic categories of persons, and, in the second column, the way in which they correspond to language identities. The term "American" has two meaning:

- One of national identity
- A second one of the ethnic category of citizens who are tokens par excellence of the identity, that is, not members of any other of the many "foreign" groups. The national language, English, is the language identity

of this group.

Table 2. Taxonomy of Ethnic Categories of Social-Person in the United States in Conjunction with Language Identities

ETHNIC IDENTITY	LANGUAGE
American (National Identity)	English
American	English
Mexican American	Spanish (+/- English)
Chinese American	Chinese (+/- English)
Italian American	Italian (+/- English)
Japanese American	Japanese (+/- English)
Navajo	Navajo (+/- English)
Apache	Apache (+/- English)

The increase of ESL students across the nation has resulted in large numbers of students whose first language is not English and in schools that are unprepared to attend to their educational needs. McArthur, (1998) has pointed out that none of the popular comprehensive school reform models have been designed specifically with ESL students in mind. Only recently have these models been adjusted to serve this clientele.

The program models of instruction for ESL students have been influenced by federal, state and local policies. These are the most common instructional programs currently serving ESL students.

1. Transitional bilingual education (TBE) programs. The nation's most common bilingual education model and most widely supported by federal and state funding. TBE is a compensatory or remedial model designed to prepare ESL students to enter mainstream all-English classes. The overall instruction includes the student's native language in all subject areas as well as instruction in English as a second language, but only for two to three years. Students receive bilingual instruction until they are proficient enough in English to achieve academically in their second language at the same level as native English speakers. ESL is an integral component of the TBE program. During the English instructional time, ESL teachers provide ESL students with access to English and academic content using the standards-based curriculum, taught with second language strategies. After a period of time, usually three years, students are “transitioned” into the mainstream curriculum. TBE programs have as their aim facilitating a transition from monolingualism in a non-English

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language through bilingualism on an individual level to ultimate English monolingualism on the community level. Bilingualism is seen as transitional, with ideal goal being English monolingualism for the entire curriculum and instruction (Baker and Prys Jones, 1998). Language Transition Support Services programs of about a year long are sometimes organized within the district to receive TBE program students who have not achieved high levels of language proficiency during the three years. The problems with the TBE model are: a) it is perceived as remedial, segregated and compensatory education, as a low ability track program for slow students; b) it is based on the erroneous assumption that two or three years is sufficient time to learn both social and academic English; and c) students who are not yet proficient in English score very low on the tests in English, and become frustrated with their program and potential dropouts.

2. ESL Pullout. This program is taught by extra resource teachers who are trained in second language teaching methodology. The teacher may have a resource room where ESL students of diverse levels of language proficiency, ages, and grade levels may come and go during the day, some staying longer than others. The main problem with this model is of no access for ESL students to: a) schooling in their native language; b) the full standards-based curriculum; c) curriculum articulation with mainstream classroom teachers and; d) full school participation with English-speaking peers.

3. Shelter English Instruction. A program of instruction in which English and academic content are taught. It is an effective program when content area teachers are properly trained to use effective second-language teaching strategies and who accomplish language and content objectives in each lesson. Some of the curriculum content lends itself to experiments and hands-on experiences that are part of second-language acquisition methods (using visual aids, gestures, body language, realia, and cooperative learning groups) to help ESL students learn English and the standards-based curriculum. The ESL students' native language is not used in the classroom. Sheltered English Instruction is more effective than ESL pullout because ESL students have access to the standards-based curriculum while they are learning English. Sheltered English Instruction is often a component of TBE programs and serves as bridge between the bilingual program and the regular mainstream program.

4. Two-way, dual-language or bilingual immersion programs. An additive or enrichment model designed to achieve bilingual in minority and majority languages, ESL students and English speakers. The model cultivates the native language skills of speakers of a minority language (e.g. Spanish, Korean, Navajo) and English speakers. These programs provide a minimum of six years of bilingual instruction in which students from the two language backgrounds are integrated in most or all of their content instruction. Both languages are separated for instruction and the use of minority language at least 50% of the instructional time and as much as 90% in the early grades. ESL students are exposed to the standards-based curriculum, which leads to full language proficiency and mastery of content. Two-way bilingual programs are inclusive and integrated education for all the students in contrast with the segregated, exclusive education offered in TBE or ESL pullout programs. Two-way programs are considered equitable educational programs that treat all students as equal members of the school community. They can also become educational reform tools as school become transformed by increases in the numbers of ESL students who bring the richness of linguistic and cultural diversity with them to school. As whole-school reform tools, two-way program goals are to: a) promote native language literacy skills and balanced bilingualism; b) enrich with a quality program design for standards-based education; c) educate first-class students to achieve at the highest levels; d) do justice to the two languages and cultures based on a well-designed infrastructure and e) dispel the myth and mindset as an enrichment, rather than a remedial, bilingual program before and during program implementation. Recent research evidence points to two-way bilingual programs as beneficial in the reading achievement of ESL students.

Conclusion

It is important to note that this paper was not an evaluation of bilingual education programs, but an overview of the characteristics of its current state in the United States. Although bilingual education was initially implemented to address political, social, economic, and educational injustices, it instead remains a powerful instrument of mainstreaming minority-language students. It is pointless to expect that bilingual education will ever lead to a multicultural society unless a restructuring of the historical, hegemonic relationship between language

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and culture takes place in the combined form of ESL teaching programs. Schools and educational systems, however, are far behind in their understanding of the complexity involved in identity formation and the transformation of transnational migrant students in contemporary society. The curricular and educational practices of liberal pluralism and liberal multiculturalism do not question power relationships in constructing racial and ethnic identity and only celebrate the exotic other. A critical understanding of identity formation and transformation of linguistically and culturally diverse students, a reexamination of the hegemonic notion of citizenship, and the application of a critical understanding of such to school practices, are urgent necessities for current educational practices.

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