

An Introduction to Bilingualism and Bilingual Education in Mexico

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The idea of devoting a special themed issue of the MEXTESOL Journal to the topic of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education was sparked at the 2000 National Convention in Aguascalientes by Carol Lethaby's presentation on bilingual education. In her talk Carol laid out the issues and challenges facing educators who work in the field of private English/Spanish bilingual education (see Lethaby, this number), and these were received with interest and enthusiasm. During the discussion that followed, however, there were comments reflecting the diverse sociolinguistic realities of teaching bilingually in different regions of the country. There were also questions from public school educators and those concerned with multilingualism in Mexico's many indigenous language communities. Clearly, these were important ideas and questions about bilingual education that did not fit neatly into the private school model. (There are other worthy topics, such as bilingualism and deaf education and the cognitive dimensions of bilingualism, that were not raised at the Convention and, unfortunately, are not much considered here. For another special issue perhaps!) Although all participants seemed to agree that advanced levels of academic proficiency in two languages should be the goal of bilingual programs, it became apparent, in this and subsequent discussions, that the very nature of bilingualism and bilingual education are perceived quite differently in different contexts.

The goal of this special issue is to present to readers of the Journal an initial look at two traditions of bilingual education, indeed two different understandings of bilingualism, that have traditionally been separated in Mexico. Suzanne Romaine's (1999) distinction between "elite" and "folk" routes to child simultaneous bilingualism is useful here. According to Romaine (1999, p. 61) most of what we know about the development of childhood bilingualism is based on studies of "middle-class" and relatively privileged populations." In such elite contexts, bilingualism generally involves at least one European language of wider communication (such as English or Spanish), and bilingual education is typically undertaken voluntarily by families who recognize the prestige of bilingualism and are able and willing to devote considerable financial resources to raising bilingual children. In contrast, we know relatively little about how the majority of the world's children become bilingual. In 'folk' contexts, including Mexico's indigenous and immigrant communities, children do not enjoy the same financial or educational resources. Their home language is typically not the prestige language of the community and, in most cases, their acquisition of another (generally European) language is a matter of economic and even physical survival. For these young bilinguals, their home language is underdeveloped and frequently ignored completely in school. Thus, education becomes a subtractive process in which they may lose competence in one language while attempting to gain competence in another.

As English teachers and researchers interested in the acquisition of English as a foreign language in Mexican contexts, many members of MEXTESOL are closely involved with the formation of elite bilinguals. A quick look at the contents of past Journals and convention programs reveals this pattern. Why should these readers be concerned with folk bilingualism? And why should colleagues working in folk bilingual contexts, including educators associated with the *Secretaría de Educación Pública*, care about elite bilingual schooling? Without reifying the concepts of folk and elite bilingualism--after all, a bilingual learner raised in a particular set of circumstances may suddenly find herself in a very different sociolinguistic situation through transnational migration, for example--I would like to offer three reasons that I find very powerful.

First, and in the most basic sense, it is important to understand that despite very different social conditions, the mental faculties that govern first and second language acquisition are universal human properties (Hall, in preparation; review by Rico Sulayes, this number). In other words, from a cognitive perspective, folk and elite bilinguals do not differ in the ways that they acquire new languages and further develop languages they already use. Whether our primary concern is teaching/researching folk or elite forms of bilingual education, we should all recognize the underlying principles of bilingualism involved (Grosjean, 2001). In this sense, what bilinguals do with their languages in a particular educational context suggests possibilities for language professionals working elsewhere.

Second, there is growing awareness that many of the world's smaller languages are disappearing at an increasingly rapid rate (see Vázquez' review, this number). As teachers of the fastest growing language in the world (Phillipson, 2000), what are the implications of our work on the continued vitality of Mexico's indigenous languages? English, like Spanish before it, is increasingly identified as a 'killer language' (Skuttnab-Kangas, 2002). Should the development of English be a goal in communities like the Alto Balsas region of Guerrero (Flores Farfán, this number), in Purépecha-speaking communities in Michoacán (Hamel, 2000), and other places where educators and community members struggle to maintain the vitality of indigenous languages? Who decides and in whose interest (McCarty & Watahomigie, 1998)? If so, at what grade level and how should English education be introduced? Despite a recent government stance that indigenous language education should be available to folk and elite bilinguals alike from primary school (see Schmelkes' commentary in this number), Francis and Ryan (1998) suggest that for the youth of the Malinche region of Tlaxcala the prestige of English is a barrier to interest in Mexicano (Nahuatl) language and culture, an argument supported for Mexican indigenous communities generally (Vergara Romani, this number). Given this unique linguistic and cultural diversity (see Cifuentes, 1998 for a historical overview of multilingualism in Mexico), the "socio-politics of English language teaching" (Hall & Eggington, 2000) holds important implications for all Mexican language educators.

Finally, I would like to offer a third justification for considering both forms of bilingual education, namely that their historical institutional and

ideological separation has prevented us from seeing ways in which they may actually be quite similar. It is important to point out that virtually all English teachers in Mexico are involved in some form of bilingual education, although perhaps many of us would not immediately recognize the label. Whatever our official titles or the nature of the school in which we teach, we are (or ought to be!) concerned with many of the same issues. Questions about community identity and language allocation in bilingual instruction (Salsbury & Heskin; Lethaby, this number); teacher training (Kuhlman et al.; Lethaby, this number); government-sponsored language policies (Signoret Dorcasberro; Vergara Romani, this number); and the role of literacy in bilingual instruction (Flores Farfán; Kuhlman et al., this number) are important in any bilingual program. Again, I believe that bilingual educators can learn a great deal by considering how such questions are handled in other contexts with different populations.

The purpose of this special issue, then, is to encourage readers to discover connections between elite and folk forms of bilingualism and bilingual education, and hopefully to consider their own practices in light of this knowledge. I believe that this exchange of ideas can strengthen pedagogy in both elite and folk contexts. But this is certainly not a simple proposition.

My fear is that, as in any dialogue between discourse communities and traditions of unequal levels of power, that the dialogue will be defined and constructed in terms of the elite forms. Consider, for example, the list of internet resources compiled by Kathryn Singh (this number), where users will find an exciting variety of useful resources--overwhelmingly in English and primarily concerned with elite and U.S./European dominated views of bilingual education.

Unfortunately, there are comparatively few opportunities for elite bilingual educators to learn from their folk bilingual counterparts. In the case of Mexico, my specific concern is that the true potential of this exchange will not be fully realized because members of both traditions have been effectively socialized to accept the predominance of theories based on elite, international models of bilingualism and on the unstudied and unfounded assumption that folk and local forms of bilingualism have little to offer (Jiménez, 2003; Smith, in press). I hope that the articles and reviews presented in this special issue will prove useful to readers who wish to actively address the current imbalance in our collective knowledge of bilingualism and bilingual education in Mexico.

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