

Professional Practice Issues

Private English/Spanish Bilingual Education in Mexico: Looking at our Reality

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the objectives of private bilingual education in Mexico, the reasons for its growth, and the objections that are raised. The challenges to bilingual education are then examined, including those of teacher training, finding appropriate staff, what students can realistically achieve, and which materials to use. Finally, the implications of the current situation will be discussed, cautioning school administrators and educators to be aware of their reality in order to be fair and honest to both students and parents.

The Current Situation

A quick look at the telephone directory in any city in Mexico will tell you that the words 'bilingual' and 'bilingual education' are considered important in private education. In Guadalajara there are over fifty such schools. A closer look behind the labels will reveal that the same words are used to describe very different types of educational programmes. 'Bilingual' schools vary from kindergartens that offer three hours of English a week to high schools that offer three hours of Spanish a week, with the full range in between, as shown in Figure 1.

Based on ten years of experience teaching and training teachers in bilingual schools in Mexico, including many hours of observation and working with teachers and administrators, it is my intention to discuss private 'bilingual' English/Spanish education only, and to investigate the objectives, reasons for, objections to, problems and implications for this growing trend in Mexico, I call on school owners and administrators to look closely at our reality in terms of teachers, training, students, and materials when making claims about what their programmes can achieve.

Figure 1. Program models in Private Bilingual Programs in Mexico.

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|------------------------------|--|
| <u>Kindergarten</u> | |
| * | 100% English (sometimes with 30 mins - 1 hour per day in Spanish) |
| * | EFL (3-5 hours per week of exposure to English) |
| <u>Primary School</u> | |
| * | 100% English (with 30 mins - 1 hour per day in Spanish) |
| * | half day English, half day Spanish (if there are five class hours per day, two and a half are in English, two and a half in Spanish) |
| * | one day English; one day Spanish (the school alternates the language of instruction between Spanish and English on a daily basis) |
| * | EFL (3-5 hours per week of exposure to English) |
| <u>Secondary School</u> | |
| * | 100% English (with 30 mins - 1 hour per day in Spanish) |
| * | one or more subjects in English |
| * | EFL (3-5 hours per week of exposure to English) |
| <u>High School ('prepa')</u> | |
| * | 100% English (with 30 mins - 1 hour per day in Spanish) |
| * | one or more subjects in English |
| * | EFL (3-5 hours per week of exposure to English) |

Reasons for Bilingual Education

First of all, why? This is Mexico, a primarily Spanish-speaking country. Why do we want to use English - a 'foreign' language - as the medium of instruction for our young people? What is the objective of elite bilingual education in Mexico and what are the reasons behind its current popularity? First, let's consider the objective. I think that the main objective, although often not explicitly stated, of most bilingual schools, those that have at least half their timetable in English and/or academic subject area in English would go something like this: "To produce very proficient English and Spanish users who can use both languages for social, academic and business purposes."

Perhaps this objective is very obvious, but it seems that with the rush to open a 'bilingual' school and the prestige that this brings, very often the objectives and reasons for doing so get lost or are perhaps not fully thought through. Therefore, I think it is important to take time to investigate the reasons why bilingual education might be a good idea.

Cognitive Advantages

First, and most convincingly, I think, is that research now shows that there is the possibility that bilinguals have cognitive advantages over monolinguals.

Baker (2001) cites research which shows higher scores in IQ tests (recognising the flaws in this type of measure of 'intelligence') for bilinguals. Baker claims that we are now in what he calls the 'period of additive effects', following the periods of 'detrimental effects' (when it was thought that bilingualism was actually dangerous (from 1800-1962)) and 'neutral effects' (when it was thought that being bilingual had no effect on cognition (1937 - 1960)). Interestingly enough, this is probably not the idea that is put forward most strongly by those working in bilingual schools in Mexico. There is no doubt that there is still a considerable amount of suspicion surrounding bilingual education, which perhaps corresponds more closely to Baker's 'period of detrimental effects' and will be discussed more fully in section 3.4.

Employment and Study Opportunities

Secondly, here in Mexico it is becoming increasingly clear that there are more opportunities available to people who have knowledge of the English language, both for study and in terms of getting a job. Any student who wants to study a graduate degree is at an advantage if s/he is an efficient reader in English, and study opportunities in other countries are often only open to those who have developed advanced knowledge of English. In terms of employment, how many job advertisements today ask for candidates who have a good level of English?

Broadening Horizons

The third argument put forward for bilingual English-Spanish education in Mexico is the idea that a person who knows another language is somehow more open-minded or even more 'cultured' than a monolingual. I think these are dangerous things to assume, and we may be in danger of imposing our own ideas of what 'cultured' means (whose/what 'culture'?), but there is no doubt that knowing English gives access to cultural opportunities that a monolingual Spanish speaker would not have. I was interested to notice on a recent visit to Prague in the Czech Republic that the famous Black Light Theatre of Prague gives bilingual performances in Czech and English simultaneously. This is one tiny example of the use of English as an international language.

Objections to Bilingual Education

Linguicism

Although private bilingual education in Mexico is increasing, there are still many objections raised. Firstly, the question of 'linguicism' - is Spanish somehow 'devalued' if the child is educated in a language which is not Spanish, her/his mother tongue? This is obviously a more sensitive issue when the language involved is lower in the world language power hierarchy, such as some of the indigenous languages of Mexico, but with the proximity of the huge English-speaking superpower to Mexico and the threat of the Dominance of the English language worldwide, this issue should not be dismissed lightly. There are more than 90 indigenous languages in Mexico, many of which are in danger of dying out (see www.azteca.net/aztec/lang.html for exact figures), and certainly the increased use of English as the language of instruction is doing nothing to keep those languages alive. I recognize the irony of English language educators talking about

the injustice of the dominance of the English language, but as Pennycook says "At the very least, intimately involved as we are with the spread of English, we should be acutely aware of the implications of this spread for the reproduction of global inequalities." (Pennycook, 1995: 55).

English as the 'Key to Success'

Secondly, and related to the first objection, is the question of whether it is 'fair' that English has become the 'key to success'. David Graddol states that "proficiency in English may be one of the mechanisms for dividing those who have access to wealth and information and those who don't" (1997: 38). This is a Spanish-speaking country with Spanish-speaking institutions. Why should English be the gatekeeper to positions of wealth and power? This is precisely the kind of question that students, teachers and parents were asking when a private high school I was working at, decided that from one semester to the next they were going to incorporate English as the medium of instruction for various subject areas. The coordinator of the mathematics department did not know English, and it had been decided that maths was one of the subjects that was to be given in English after the third semester. She was forced to begin to learn English or lose her position. The art history coordinator was (rightly, I believe) concerned that the students were going to be learning about Mexican art (in particular Orozco's murals in Guadalajara) in English!

Elitism

Another criticism of bilingual English-Spanish schools in Mexico is that they are seen as elitist, and this is clearly something used by school owners and parents for mutual benefit. Whether the 'elite product' being offered is actually superior in any way to the cheaper, or even free, monolingual education a child can receive deserves very serious consideration. There are many programs that advertise high numbers of hours in English with content areas supposedly being taught in English, but on closer inspection it may be found that this is not the reality, and the teacher her/himself may not be proficient in English, or the students may not have an appropriate level (what Cummins calls the Threshold level) to be able to deal with the content in English. Instruction is sometimes not actually given in English, but in Spanish (either because the teacher has problems manipulating the content in her/his second language and/or because the students do not understand the concepts being taught in a language of instruction which is not their first language), or in a mixture of the two languages. I think this is the right thing to do in the situations mentioned above, but it does mean that the students are not receiving the amount of input in English that is being advertised, and this will have consequences in terms of the level of English that students can expect to achieve. This relates very closely to the real challenge of teacher training and teacher availability discussed further 4.1.

Mexicanidad

Another objection to bilingual education is the idea that someone who is educated in a language that is not their first language is somehow missing something: the idea that they are somehow split in two. In the case of Mexico, there exists the idea that children somehow become 'less Mexican' if they are taught in English. Baker quotes a professor at Cambridge University at the end of the 19th century to illustrate this point of view: "If it were possible for a child to live in two languages at once equally well, so much the worse." His intellectual and spiritual growth would not thereby be doubled, but halved. Unity of mind and character would have great difficulty in asserting itself in such circumstances." (Laurie, 1890: 15 cited in Baker, 2001: 135). There is still some suspicion surrounding bilingual education, particularly when the parents and other teachers at a bilingual school do not know English. In such cases, sensitivity is clearly called for. The most successful bilingual schools I have encountered have been those which celebrate Mexico and its culture, while at the same time making comparisons and contrasts with target cultures.

Subtractive Bilingualism

The final objection I would like to discuss and the one that I feel is the most important is the question of the level of proficiency achieved by the students in the two languages. Certainly, one of the criticisms leveled at bilingual education in the USA by Mexican parents and children is that the child does not achieve full academic proficiency in EITHER language (what Cummins calls 'subtractive bilingualism'). I would argue that if bilingual education is not carried out with thought and responsibility, this is a serious danger. Bilingual education has had a difficult and controversial history in the USA and many children who could have gained from bilingual education have been deprived of it. An English literature teacher teaching in California recently asked me what to do with a group of middle school students (secundaria) who could not read. Finding out that they were all from Spanish-speaking backgrounds, I told her "Teach them to read in Spanish." "I would lose my job if the authorities heard me even speaking to these kids in Spanish," was her reply. We do not have the same emotional opposition to bilingual education in Mexico - nor do children NEED bilingual education in the same way they NEED it in the US, so we have no excuse to put children in a situation where they are placed in a content area class in English when they do not have a sufficient level of English to be able to cope with the content area. A student's level of English should not be affecting their cognitive development and if this is the case (i.e., a child is failing, for example, a maths class, because s/he does not have an adequate level of English to know what is going on), that student should be studying the subject matter in Spanish and continuing with their English development until s/he knows enough English to deal with maths in English.

Some Challenges for Private Bilingual Education in Mexico

Teacher Training Needs

This brings us to some of the challenges of bilingual education in Mexico. First of all, there is the issue of teachers and teacher training/education. Schools face more and more pressure to increase the amount of hours and subjects given in English, but at the same time they face the problem of where to find the teachers to run such a school.

Spanish-Speaking Content Area Teachers

There are three possibilities: First, there are Spanish-speaking content area teachers who speak some English and are asked to give their class in English. Unfortunately, they often do not have sufficient command of the English language to give their classes in English. As Cummins (1992) states, it is not the same to be able to do cognitively undemanding tasks in a foreign language, such as chatting, as to be able to do cognitively demanding tasks such as teaching history or mathematics.

EFL Teachers

Secondly, there are trained EFL teachers who do not have training or background in the subject area and often do not feel qualified to give content area instruction in English.

English-Speaking Content Area Teachers

Thirdly, there are English-speaking content area teachers who are not aware of the problems of teaching students who do not have English as their first language. Schools sometimes choose to hire native-speaking content area teachers who have experience teaching the subject to children who are only learning the content, but not to children who need to work on both the content *and* aspects of language.

All three of the aforementioned types of teachers clearly have training needs, but unfortunately up to now there has been little effort to deal with the needs of teachers in bilingual schools. The British Council has been developing a Diploma for Teachers in Bilingual Schools, but, as far as I am aware, this is the only specific course in Mexico designed to meet particular needs of teachers in bilingual schools. This course works on techniques for teaching both content and language, particularly focusing on working with students who have Spanish as their first language and English as their second language. People who take the diploma are both content area teachers (native and non-native English speakers) as well as EFL teachers (native and non-native English speakers), and the course emphasizes the

common goals and how teachers need to be working together. It is not uncommon in bilingual schools to find that the subject area teachers are struggling with the language aspect of their course (for example, pronunciation and meaning of key vocabulary), while the English teachers at the same school are focusing purely on structural language objectives such as 'the present perfect tense'.

Materials

The second major problem that I would like to address is that of materials for bilingual schools. At present there are NO materials specifically designed for the private Mexican bilingual English-Spanish situation. By this, I mean materials for either primary schools that teach a good part of their timetable in English or for secondary or high schools that teach subject areas in English. So, there are three options for bilingual schools at the moment, and I would argue that there are problems with all of them.

The first option in the English classroom is to use materials designed for an EFL situation. However, EFL materials tend to be too easy for students who are receiving more than 3-5 hours a week of their schooling in English, and the materials do not go fast enough for the advances that the learner is making because of the amount of input s/he is receiving. At the same time, EFL materials focus only on language objectives, while children in bilingual schools are studying in English and would profit more from English language instruction which took a more content-based approach, and also focused on academic English and study skills.

The second option is for bilingual schools to use materials designed for an ESL situation, that is, for children who are learning English in an English-speaking environment, such as the USA or Canada. There are problems here, too. First of all, these materials will contain culturally specific elements which are not appropriate for the Mexican context; they will focus on the USA if they are designed for children in the USA or on Canada if they are designed for children in Canada. Secondly, these books will usually have language that is above the level of the learner. These materials tend to assume that the child will learn basic vocabulary and structures from the environment, OUTSIDE the classroom. For children in bilingual schools in Mexico, this is not typically the case, and children need to work on the basic structures and vocabulary of English INSIDE the classroom. How often do teachers struggle with sophisticated vocabulary like 'bloodcurdling' when the eight-year old children they are teaching have no idea how to say 'desk' in English or how to form a simple past tense sentence?

Another option for bilingual schools is to use materials designed for native English speaker children. These are the most problematic of all. Firstly, like ESL materials, they feature language which is above the level of the learner and, obviously, being designed for native speakers, they *focus* on language which is above the level of the learner. At the same time, they offer no practice in 'language for language's sake'; that is, they do not offer opportunities to practice a particular structure or function, because they assume that the children for whom the material

is designed can already do this and will get plenty of practice doing it with their friends and with their parents and other people in their environment. Like ESL materials, the content will often be inappropriate for Mexican learners.

Implications

So, what are the implications of the aforementioned challenges to bilingual school owners and administrators?

Level of English

First of all, I think there is a responsibility to be realistic and honest about what they actually offer and can help learners achieve. If the student is going to receive three hours of English instruction a week and the rest of the time in Spanish, what level of English will that child realistically reach? Bilingual schools have a responsibility to be fair and honest with students, too. If students are to take content area courses in English, their level of English should be checked. If they do not have a satisfactory level to be able to deal with content in English, then they should take the subject in Spanish and continue working on bringing up their level of English. It is not fair to the child if s/he is failing a subject because s/he does not have the adequate level of English to be able to deal with the content in the target language.

Teacher Training

Secondly, if the school wishes to offer mathematics in English to the students but they have no trained qualified teacher to do so, is it honest and/or responsible to offer this? There needs to be far more training for teachers in bilingual situations - teachers themselves need to have a good level of English, they need to know how to teach content in English to non-native speaking students (if they are content teachers), and how best to help students who are not just learning the English language but learning CONTENT in English (if they are English teachers).

Materials Development

Finally, school owners, administrators and coordinators need to be aware that there are no ideal materials for private English-Spanish bilingual schools currently available. They must be prepared to adapt and create materials which ARE suitable for their students and their context. This, of course, implies the training described above.

I certainly welcome the growth and development of bilingual education in Mexico, but emphasize that it should be for the "right" reasons, that is, to produce proficient users of both Spanish and English who will have more opportunities available to them, and not simply to create a more expensive, more elite private school system.

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For lists and information about bilingual schools in Mexico:

http://www.iie.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Research_Publications/Archives/Bilingual_Schools_in_Mexico/into.htm

<http://www.hispanolink.com/Mexico/educacion/colegios.htm>

For some examples of bilingual schools in Mexico:

<http://www.cananea.com/minerva/minerva.htm>

<http://www.greengates.edu.mx/>

<http://www.cih.edu.mx/>

For more information about bilingual teacher training:

www.britishcouncil.org.mx