

# Bilingual Education: History Politics Theory and Practice



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A Report by the Former  
Washington Editor of  
Education Week

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James Crawford

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History  
Politics  
Theory  
and  
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*To the memory of my father*



# Contents

Acknowledgments 7

Preface 9

Introduction 11

## HISTORY

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1 Bilingualism in America: A Forgotten Legacy 18

2 The Evolution of Federal Policy 31

## POLITICS

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3 English Only or English Plus? 52

4 The Bennett Years 70

## THEORY

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5 The Effectiveness Debate 86

6 Basic Research on Language Acquisition 97

7 Alternatives to Bilingual Education 112

## PRACTICE

---

8 Theory into Practice: The Case Studies Project 126

9 Indian Bilingual Education 142

10 California: Coping with Diversity 152

11 Two-Way Bilingual Education 163

Glossary of Program Models 175

Sources and Suggested Reading 179

Index 193



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# Preface

**W**e are privileged to be able to publish James Crawford's thorough analysis of bilingual education, reviewing its past and projecting its future.

A graduate of Harvard University, Mr. Crawford has worked as a journalist since the late 1970s, writing on issues ranging from job safety and health to education and language policy. As Congressional editor of *Federal Times*, he reported from Capitol Hill on matters of concern to government employees.

He joined *Education Week* in 1985, initially as a staff writer and later as Washington editor. In covering a wide spectrum of educational topics, he developed a special interest in bilingual education.

Since August 1987 James Crawford has devoted his time to freelance writing and lecturing—including the writing of this book. The depth and objectivity of this work is a testimonial to his scholarship.

Barbara J. Crane



# Introduction

*In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was made flesh. It was so in the beginning and it is so today. The language, the Word, carries within it the history, the culture, the traditions, the very life of a people, the flesh. Language is people. We cannot even conceive of a people without a language, or a language without a people. The two are one and the same. To know one is to know the other.*

Sabine Ulibarri

The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 marked a new outlook toward Americans whose mother tongue is not English. Previously in our history, minority languages had been accommodated at certain times, repressed at others. Most often, they had been ignored. The assumption was, and is, that non-English speakers would come to see the advantages of adopting the majority language as their own. Notwithstanding some episodes of intolerance, laissez-faire has predominated, a language policy that has served to foster assimilation on a voluntary basis. Millions of immigrants have abandoned their native tongues and embraced English in what is arguably the largest, fastest, and most diverse language shift in recorded history, a phenomenon one linguist has described as “Babel in reverse.”

But our neglect of minority tongues was not entirely benign. Contrary to myth, immigrant children were more likely to sink than swim in English-language classrooms. In 1908 just 13 percent of such students who were enrolled in New York City schools at age twelve went on to high school (as compared with 32 percent of white children whose parents were native born). Some immigrants succeeded without formal schooling, thanks to strong backs, entrepreneurial talents, or political skills; they, too, were in the minority.

By the 1960s, while high dropout rates persisted among language-minority children, the country’s economy had changed. Upward mobility was no longer an option for those without English literacy. Prospects were doubly limited for groups who faced discrimination on the basis of race as well as language: Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and American Indians. At the same time, the civil rights movement was beginning to energize language-minority communities. Parents who had themselves been shortchanged by English-only schools were seeking a better deal for their children. Desegregation was important, but equal opportunity demanded more than equal treatment, if students could not understand the language of instruction.

Recognizing this “acute educational problem,” the U.S. Congress moved to promote “new and imaginative programs” that would teach children in their native

tongues while they learned English. Although bilingual education had been widespread before World War I in localities where German, French, Spanish, and other minority language speakers had amassed political clout, never before had it been endorsed as national policy. Not that Congress had a clear idea of what bilingual education meant — only a handful of such programs even existed in 1968 — but the lawmakers resolved that *something* had to be done about the schools' negligence toward children with limited English skills.

In short, the Bilingual Education Act was a leap of faith, an experiment based more on good intentions than good pedagogy. Today, bilingual approaches reflect the latest findings in linguistics and cognitive psychology. The past two decades have brought enormous advances in curricula, methodologies, materials, and teacher training. No longer stigmatized as slow learners, language-minority children are achieving at or near grade level by the time they leave well-designed bilingual programs, even in urban schools where failure was once the norm.

The law's success is not unqualified. Title VII has sponsored many mediocre programs: crudely conceived, unsupported by administrators, "bilingual" in name only because teachers lack fluency in the language of their students. Responding to external pressures, even well-intentioned schools have repeated mistakes of the past, for example, rushing children into regular classrooms prematurely or stigmatizing their languages and cultures. Too often, academic results have been disappointing. While poor implementation cannot invalidate bilingual education's growing roster of successes, it does make the program vulnerable to attack.

Paradoxically, political support was stronger in 1968, when the concept of bilingual education was virtually untested, than in 1988, when research is increasingly documenting its benefits. Skeptics, led by high officials of the Reagan Administration, still question the wisdom of native-language instruction: Whether children are learning English or languishing in academic ghettos. Whether some students benefit, but not others. Whether school districts should have more "flexibility" to try experimental alternatives. Whether enhancing ethnic pride has taken precedence over assimilating minorities into the mainstream.

When Secretary of Education William Bennett began to voice these concerns in 1985, his office was swamped with fan mail. After congratulating the Secretary for branding bilingual education "a failed path," many correspondents vented their hostility toward language minorities, Hispanics in particular, and their alleged resistance to English. "I think one language is enough," said a writer from Texas, who added:

Why do we have to change our culture and life style for people who claim they want to be Americans? They want all our privileges, but still try to run our lives like they were back home. . . . Is our country going to be divided from here on? First Spanish dictates. Maybe some day, Chinese or Russian.

A Florida critic asked:

What hope is there of assimilating these foreigners into American life if we encourage and assist them in perpetuating their own language instead of learning to speak English? We not only have our taxes frittered away with supporting [illegal aliens] on relief. . . . We must on top of that be taxed to educate their multitudinous offspring in their own language.

A Rhode Islander who described himself as the grandson of Norwegian and Italian immigrants wrote:

Not only is [bilingual education] fundamentally unfair to those who learned English the best way — by experience — it is profoundly un-American and a menace to our national culture.

Clearly, there is more at stake here than questions of educational effectiveness. Bilingual education is arousing passions about issues of political power and social status that are far removed from the classroom. Rarely in American history has language been the focus of so much contention. Why is this happening in the 1980s?

One reason is that, with little public discussion, the Bilingual Education Act reversed our 200-year-old tradition of *laissez-faire* toward language. Also, it appeared to contradict treasured assumptions about the Melting Pot, or more accurately, about the Anglo-conformist ethic in American culture. The law's goals were unclear. Was it intended to ease the transition to English or to encourage the maintenance of minority languages? For some, bilingual education was strictly a remedial effort, designed to overcome children's "language deficiency" and to assimilate them quickly into the mainstream. For others, it was an enrichment program, intended to develop students' linguistic resources and to preserve their cultural heritage. Rather than settle a debate, the new policy started one, and it has intensified in recent years.

Second, increased immigration has called attention to the country's linguistic diversity — though it was there all along — while fostering the erroneous perception that newcomers are no longer learning English. In the 1976 Survey of Income and Education, one in eight Americans came from a minority language background. Of these, two-thirds were native-born, including Hispanics, Francophones, American Indians, and others whose roots in this country date back many generations. Still, only about 4 percent of Americans speak no English today.<sup>1</sup> Far from slowing down, linguistic assimilation has been accelerating, according to demographic research.

Meanwhile, immigration by non-English-speakers has soared following the elimination of racial barriers in the mid-1960s. The annual number of legal entries has more than doubled since that time, and the source of newcomers has changed dramatically, from developed nations to the Third World.<sup>2</sup> Undocumented immigrants, including political refugees from Southeast Asia and Central America, also appear to be on the rise.

In many American communities, the newcomers are exerting a major and, for some, an unwelcome impact. A new nativism has emerged in this decade. The English Only movement, an outgrowth of the immigration-restrictionist lobby, has skillfully manipulated language as a symbol of national unity and ethnic divisiveness. Early in this century, those who sought to exclude other races and cultures invoked claims of Anglo-Saxon superiority. But in the 1980s, explicit racial loyalties are no longer acceptable in our political discourse. Language loyalties, on the other hand, remain largely devoid of associations with social injustice. While race is immutable, immigrants can and often do exchange their mother tongue for another. And so, for those who resent the presence of Hispanics and Asians, language politics has become a convenient surrogate for racial politics.

Third, bilingual education is contentious for the simple reason that it disrupts established patterns. For schools it causes multiple headaches — recruiting qualified teachers, redesigning curricula, reorganizing class schedules — that many administrators would like to avoid. Monolingual teachers fear reassignment, loss of status, or other career setbacks. English-speaking parents worry about the neglect of their own children. Taxpayers expect the bill to be outlandish.

Nevertheless, the demographic challenge must be faced. During the decade of the 1970s, the U.S. population grew by 11.6 percent overall, while Hispanics increased by 61 percent and Asian Americans by 233 percent. Taken together, these two groups will represent 12.3 percent of American residents by the year 2000 and 18.1 percent by 2030, according to the Population Reference Bureau. Because language minorities are younger than other Americans on average, their impact will be felt even sooner in the schools.

Already, their educational needs are formidable. In study after study, a non-English-language background has been correlated with higher rates of falling behind, failing, and dropping out. Language-minority youths “are 1.5 times more likely than their English language counterparts to have discontinued school before completing twelve years,” and Hispanic youths are more than twice as likely, according to a 1988 report by the Intercultural Development Research Association.

Finally, bilingual education arouses opposition because it contradicts peculiarly American notions about language. As a people we have relatively limited experience with bilingualism on the one hand, and strongly held myths about it on the other. Monolinguals in this country seldom appreciate the time and effort involved in acquiring a second language (though they may not feel up to the task themselves). Ignorance of linguistic matters is commonplace even in educated circles. So much so that Kenneth G. Wilson, professor of English and former vice president of the University of Connecticut, can write in 1987:

Almost all the well-meaning claims for bilingual education turn out to be irrelevant because language doesn’t work that way. . . . We must do everything to introduce the second language as early as possible, the earlier the

better. Nursery school is better than kindergarten, kindergarten better than first grade, and first grade better than later grades. . . . Even twenty years ago we knew a fair number of things about the way children learn language. We knew many of these things only empirically then; today we have much more basic science in hand to explain these empirical data.

Despite his pretensions, Wilson apparently has no inkling of the research on second-language acquisition over the past twenty years. Evidence has mounted steadily against the “critical period” hypothesis that languages are best learned in early childhood. Older language students, with their greater cognitive capacity and knowledge of the world, appear to have a significant edge over younger ones, according to a growing body of research.<sup>3</sup> Where does Wilson get his information? He cites only “personal anecdotal evidence . . . from watching my two-to-three-year-old daughter learn Norwegian.”

The point here is not to single out Professor Wilson for rebuke, but to illustrate the prevalence of opinionated discourse about language. It is a subject that is dear to all of us, bound up with individual and group identity, status, intellect, culture, nationalism, and freedom. When it comes to language, we are willing to take on the experts. Lay persons who would feel unqualified to speak on other pedagogical topics are eager to express their views about bilingual education.

Certainly, this is a matter that *should* concern all Americans. It is not just a question of how we will run our schools, but of what kind of society we aspire to be: pluralist or conformist, humane or intolerant. All the more reason that the debate should be informed. My aim in this book is to provide the factual context — the history, politics, theory, and practice of bilingual education — for those who want to understand and influence this important discussion.

## Notes

1. For U.S. residents above four years of age, 98 percent speak English “well” or “very well,” according to the 1980 Census.
2. Asians accounted for 44 percent of the 600,000 legal immigrants in 1986 (as compared with only 5 percent in the decade of the 1950s); Latin Americans, 39 percent (up from 24 percent); and Europeans, 10 percent (down from 52 percent).
3. Certainly, starting young is an advantage in the sense that proficiency in a second language takes several years to achieve. No researcher would dispute this rationale for early programs of English as a second language or Foreign Language at the Elementary School (FLES). But there appears to be no pedagogical basis for hurrying limited-English-proficient children into mainstream classrooms; in fact, such practices are likely to be harmful (see Chapter 6).



