Two-Way Bilingual Immersion (Twi) With Low-Income Urban Student Populations: Dilemmas of Equity

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Abstract

Two-way immersion (TWI) programs enjoy increasing popularity in many United States' public schools as a successful model of bilingual education that promotes the integration of linguistic minority and mainstream children. However, the segregated nature of public school in large urban areas presents a challenge to implementation of TWI that benefits all students. This article focuses on urban school population trends in the United States, and the scarce published research examining the variables of race, linguistic variety, and poverty, and it proposes a research agenda that might strengthen future TWI designs in urban settings.

Keywords:

Two-way Immersion - Use of Vernacular - Urban Schools - Equity - Poverty

Introduction

Two-way immersion (TWI) programs enjoy increasing popularity in many United States' public schools as a successful model of bilingual education that promotes the integration of linguistic minority and mainstream children. Among many other groups interested in promoting bilingualism, the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL, see http://www.cal.org) maintains an up-to-date database of TWI programs that meet their criteria (integration of language minority and majority students for at least half of the time at all grade levels, each group making up between 1/3 and 2/3 of the total student population, who are furnished with both, content and literacy instruction), which are currently 291. The site also documents that ninety-four percent of all TWI programs serve children who speak Spanish as the native language and mainstream students.

One third of the Latino population in the U.S. is clustered around the largest urban school districts. These large school districts manage to educate 62.4 percent of children of poverty, measured by family income thresholds that make their children eligible for free or reduced price lunch in public schools. Large urban school districts often exhibit in alarming numbers the consequences of a society that still stigmatizes low-income, cultural, and

linguistic minorities. For instance, African-American children are overly represented—and virtually segregated—in the public schools of cities such as Atlanta, GA (89 percent); Baltimore, MD (88 percent); Birmingham, AL (96 percent); Detroit, IL (91 percent); New Orleans, LA (93 percent); Richmond, VA (91 percent); St. Louis, MO (81 percent); and Washington, DC (84 percent). Similarly, Latino students are overly represented in the public schools of cities such as Providence, RI (52 percent); Miami, FL (58 percent); Los Angeles, CA (71 percent); Fresno, Ca (51 percent); Denver, CO (55 percent); Dallas, TX (57 percent); and Albuquerque, NM (51 percent). (For a complete list, see (Council of the Great City Schools, 2003).

The disparity in the quality of public education provided by urban school districts in comparison with their suburban counterparts is staggering, and organizations such as the Council of Great City Schools (1999) have long endeavored to achieve equality of access. Although some urban school districts' per capita expenditures are similar to those of suburban schools, their student populations often exhibit larger percentages of pupils with special education designations, economically disadvantaged, and those with limited English language proficiency, all issues which compounded demand larger budgets per capita.

These trends in urban areas have implications for TWI programs in schools of high poverty and linguistic diversity, even if the latter is also due to the attendance of large numbers of African American children who are speakers of Ebonics (Miner, 1997; Rickford, 1999) as home language. While the general educational aims of TWI appear to be beneficial to mixed populations in the long run, adjustments need to be made that reflect an understanding of the local contexts, conditions, and specific challenges affecting student populations who participate in such programs. A comprehensive study of issues researched and challenges posed in the field of urban education (Battistich, Salomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Haberman, 1991; Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Rist, 2000; Waxman, Padron, & Stringfield, 1999), and of culturally sensitive ways of educating all minority children (Cochran-Smith, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1995) can contribute to improve the design and implementation of TWI in urban, high-poverty settings.

Background and Perspectives on Bilingual Education

A large part of the literature on bilingual education research in the United States between the 1960s and the 1980s focused its attention on what Diaz Soto (1992) identifies as "problems, deficit perspectives, and

stereotypical notions" (p. 25) of bilingual learners. Bilingual education, however, had by then a long tradition in the States, dating back to the 19th century (Castellanos, 1985; Cordasco, 1976), and under the label of foreign language or classic language education it enjoyed prestige, as exemplified in Charles Elliot's proposal for four courses of study in high school at the Committee of Ten in the late 1890s[3.] After the Supreme Court decision of Lau v. Nichols in 1974, where the lawsuit against a public school district for not providing equal access to education to their Chinese speaking children initiated by their parents found merit in the high court, bilingual education research increasingly centered on transitional bilingual education (TBE). The word "transitional" implied that bilingual education was a step between non-proficiency and English mainstreaming, an in-between strategy until the desired English fluency allowed students to join "regular" classrooms and not a goal in itself (Brisk, 1998)[4].

Post-Lau research efforts pointed to measuring student outcomes in standardized tests, and so proving the efficacy of TBE in successfully moving students from native language to English language instruction. The goal of quick assimilation of immigrants pervaded the design of such programs. As the voices of immigrant groups started to organize in a discourse of resistance, it became clear that many language-minority groups resented schooling policies that pursued the "assimilation" of their offspring. A more organized voice advocating for "acculturation" (learning English while maintaining the heritage language and traditions) started to gain consensus in the field of bilingual education. The traditional deficit-perspective that underpinned the design of TBE early-exit programs was counteracted by the appearance of TBE late-exit or language maintenance programs. The latter can be included under what Diaz Soto (1992) calls a "possibilities" paradigm or perspective that coincided with a similar trend in the debates centering on multicultural education and the strengthening of critical and postmodern perspectives in educational research in general.

[3] Charles Elliot (president of Harvard University from) was one of the most influential people in educational policy-making of his time. The four courses of study proposed by the Committee of Ten all included the study and acquisition of fluency in one to three foreign languages, for those intending to pursue a trade as much as for those college bound.

[4] Unlike in many other countries where bilingualism is a definite goal for the elite, or at least education for those who can afford private bilingual schools, in the United States bilingual education has long been regarded as a «poverty program» because of its association with low-income immigrant and undocumented families. Bilingual education's sibling, known as «foreign language education» deals in fact with content and strategies to prepare teachers for teaching a variety of tongues to «the norm,» i.e., mainstream native English speakers. It is certainly difficult to argue how strategies to adding new languages to the learner's own native one (foreign language education domain) differ from those used to teach English to low-income immigrant children who communicate in a different language at home.

Meanwhile, a trend of looking at student-outcomes-in-context and program characteristics to measure the success of bilingual programs was emerging (Brisk, 2000). This rings true for the available research on two-way bilingual (TWI) education, which largely focuses on program effectiveness, showcasing languages other than English as a resource and not a problem (Freeman, 1996; Hornberger, 1990) with evolving criteria for defining what constitutes a successful program (Lindholm, 1999; Lindholm, 1992). Some studies describe successful instructional strategies used in two-way bilingual programs (Hornberger, 1990; Peregoy, 1991; Smith & Arnot-Hopffer, 1998). Others focus on the relationship between two-way bilingual programs and parents and community (Graham & Brown, 1996; Peña, 1998). There are also a few research efforts examining the managerial aspects of two-way bilingual programs (Castro Feinberg, 1999; Met & Lorenz, 1997), and TWI teachers' perspectives (Howard & Loeb, 1998; Jackson, 2001). This topical review of trends in the available research indicates an increasing interest in TWI as a potential solution for the challenge of educating large numbers of immigrant children in non-segregated environments. I continue with a summary description of the main features of TWI.

Two-way bilingual education: An overview

As I noted above, a large part of TBE literature has an underlying deficit perspective. The new "possibilities" approach pushing for language maintenance, dual immersion, and two-way bilingual programs emerged from the notion that bilingual children were not handicapped (Cummins, 1984) but rather owners of a resource that, in the case of two-way bilingual programs, English-speakers found desirable.

There are many programs using a variety of combinations of immersion and bilingual instruction. Brisk (1998), in reviewing all bilingual models, examines the contextual and programmatic differences between dual language schools, Canadian immersion education, two-way bilingual education, two-way bilingual immersion, and maintenance bilingual education among many other programs serving the needs of language minority children (pp. 14-24).

As Lindholm (1992) calls it, two-way bilingual education is "the marriage of bilingual education for linguistic minority children and immersion education for linguistic majority children" (p. 195). In the United States, two-way immersion (TWI), also known as dual immersion, is a form of implementing bilingual education whereas language minority and language majority students share classrooms in which both, English and another language (typically the native language of the language minority students) are the

main linguistic vehicles for instruction. Although program implementations vary, integration of students who are native speakers of either language and instruction in the target language in equivalent amounts to that imparted in English are its steadier features. Unlike transitional bilingual programs, whose goal is to speedily transition children to the mainstream language, TWI creates an additive bilingual environment for all students by enabling students to develop and maintain two languages. Related to this, TWI also promotes bilingualism and biliteracy, seeking to develop positive cross-cultural proficiency and understanding in all students. The growing importance of TWI in the United States cannot be underscored, more so in a political environment that insists on the benefits of quick assimilation and appears to deny the long-term benefits of bilingualism as applied to low-income immigrant student populations[5].

The Urban Panorama

Metropolitan areas in the United States house growing linguistically and culturally diverse groups. The largest 58 urban school districts enroll over 14 percent of all schoolchildren, and over 30 percent of all native speakers of a minority language (NSML) (Antunez, 2003). In large cities, the ethnic/ racial breakdown is even more revealing: while Latino children are a mere 18.5 percent of the total student population in American public schools, that percentage grows to 32.7 when considering large urban school districts only. Concomitantly, African American children who are only 16.9 percent of the nationwide public school student population represent 37 percent of the urban public school students. All minorities combined (linguistic and racial) represent 76.8 of the urban public school population.

The urban student population configuration poses an interesting problem for urban implementations of TWI. In areas of concentrated poverty, the native English speakers (NES) are often speakers of Ebonics, who themselves must learn the standard form while in school. The NSML student population in the same areas is often composed of a variety of Spanish speakers whose own dialects differ from what is known as standard Spanish. Spanglish—a pidgin for some, a creolized language for others—has been part of the North American linguistic landscape since the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 transferred ownership of approximately two thirds of Mexican land to the United States. Yet, each of the largest groups of Spanish speakers

[5] Efforts to outlaw bilingual education led by conservative millionaire Ronald Unz have been successful in three major states-California, Arizona, and Massachusetts—and defeated in one—Colorado.

in the States-Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Dominicans, and Cubans-has its own local version.

Thus, in addition to high percentages of minority group segregation, the use Ebonics and Spanglish in many urban areas is widespread, which given the segregated nature of urban public schools does not facilitate a high rate of interaction with speakers of the standard forms of those languages other than in school. This scarce interaction with those who command dominant discursive practices—not only in terms of language but also in regards to ways of behaving, dressing, acting and valuing (Gee, 1990)—impacts the way in which children learn to "play" school.

TWI programs in urban areas often serve students of poverty who are also speakers of non-standard forms of the languages and in whose standard forms they are expected to become fluent bilinguals. Its close cousin dual immersion has been depicted as a successful model of bilingual education with bicultural aims as shown in studies of Canadian dual immersion programs (Genesee, 1987; Lambert & Tucker, 1972), mostly with mainstream speakers of English being immersed in French. Yet, current urban TWI incarnations have had mixed results in U.S. schools, with what appears to be a direct correlation between family income/educational attainment of the parents and academic success in TWI.

The plethora of linguistic varieties available in urban settings impacts the expected outcomes of TWI. Building on prior research by Nicoladis, Taylor, Lambert, and Cazabon (1998) on the lower academic achievement of African-American children in TWI when compared with their white counterparts, the outcomes of two recent studies suggest that adjustments to TWI implementations need to be made in order to serve the needs of low-income African-American children if they are called to be the "mainstream" speakers in TWI (Carrigo, 2000; Krause, 1999). Delving on language learning, those studies found that in average African American students' progress is not equivalent to that of their peers in monolingual programs (Carrigo, 2000; Krause, 1999). Educational researchers have been reluctant to focus on those types of challenges in TWI. The current political situation may understandably deter this line of research for fear of misinterpretation among those who would like to eliminate any type of bilingual education from the public schools' landscape. In her own dissertation, Parchia (2000) naively refers to the frustration of some urban African American parents with their children's progress in TWI programs, noting that "their frustration is understandable when considering that, historically, dual education immersion was not originally intended for African American youngsters" (p. 197). This

conclusion appears to rely on the troubling assumption that since TWI' success has relied to a large extent on the supportive middle class—and white—families of the mainstream students, the problems arising from having low-income, African-American children speakers of the vernacular may not be the true realm with which TWI needs to be occupied.

Both studies, Parchia's and Carrigo's present interesting contrasts, which I discuss informed by literature on urban schools and my previous experiences as a two-way bilingual teacher in a school located in the same urban school district where those studies were completed[6]. The lack of a significant mass of published research is also a reason for concern and a call for methodologically rigorous studies in this area.

A superficial understanding of the socio-political and historical contexts in which the school studied operated limit the usefulness of the findings in both studies. The city in question has been under a court mandate to desegregate its schools for approximately three decades. The phenomenon called "white flight" left the urban school district with capacity for 100,000 students with a bit more of half that number as a consequence of white middle class families moving out to the suburbs in search of quality schools for their children. Today's students are a mix of new arrivals from a variety of countries, and what Ogbu (1987) calls "involuntary minorities," including Latino and African-American families who have not been able to overcome the poverty cycle. Neighborhoods remain significantly segregated along color lines, and to a lesser extent, along linguistic background as well. TWI implementations in this urban district scarcely count with European American children as the "mainstream" student population of the program. Largely, the mainstream population is composed of low-income African-American and fully bilingual children of Latino ancestry whose parents see TWI as a Spanish language maintenance opportunity.

Carrigo's study pointed to three complex variables that affected bicultural and biliteracy development even as this urban TWI program implementation followed all relevant criteria. First, English was used less than Spanish, even during the times in which instruction was supposed to occur only in Spanish. Two factors influenced this outcome: One, that native Spanish speaking students themselves perceived English as a more prestigious language and claimed to even use English at home with siblings. Second, the teachers all had native-like fluency, but acknowledged to be more highly functional in English, for instance, to write an academic paper.

[6] Parchia's study takes place in two schools, Oyster (DC) and Hernandez (MA). Carrigo's study is an in-depth examination of the Hernandez school alone.

Second, African-American students and native English speakers did not necessarily attribute to Spanish the same standing as English. This may have been also partially impacted by African-American parents' desire to send their children to this school for reasons other than the teaching of Spanish (i.e., smaller class size, perception of better student discipline, and higher availability of resources and qualified teachers, in addition to a stable principal). Finally, the status of the few white native speakers of English remained higher than that of African-American or Latino children (as reflected in students' choices of who the smartest students were). As the most advanced Spanish speakers left on the upper grades as they gained admission to the more prestigious exam schools, the upper grades found virtually few proficient Spanish speakers/writers, which also influenced the establishment of English as the social medium of communication.

A large portion of the conclusions to which Parchia arrived in her study appeared to rely on data from the Oyster school in DC, a well-known TWI program that had garnered the attention and accolades of researchers and the community as an exemplary program (see for instance Freeman, 1996). Parchia's retelling of African-American parents commitment to the Oyster's TWI program revealed a concerted effort to school integration on the part of the parents and the underlying belief that school success was tied to the presence of demanding middle class parents. Oyster had long understood the staff's shortcomings in dealing effectively with African-American families and had initiated a partnership with Howard University to improve curriculum and strategies that help them succeed. None of these staff concerns became evident at the Hernandez school where Parchia also collected data, which was also the focus of Carrigo's study. Furthermore, the population of African-American and white children at the Hernandez has steadily decreased, and the school is no longer considered to meet the criteria laid out by CAL. The heightened racial segregation of the mostly low-income African American population in the city where the Hernandez is located sharply contrasts the relative higher socio-economic status of African-American in DC, and may be one of the factors that need further study.

Implications and Further Research

The challenges associated with urban public schools attended by large number of children of poverty have been the focus of study for researchers invested in achieving quality schooling for all students (see for example Haberman, 1991; Lippman, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Rist, 2000; Waxman, Padron, & Stringfield, 1999).

Lack of resources, insufficient parental presence in the schools, less qualified teachers, and overcrowding (to name a few) do not disappear with the implementation of TWI. The lessons learned from the study of urban school challenges as inherently interrelated with socio-economics could enhance the contextual knowledge base for those interested in promoting bilingualism and biculturalism amongst low-income student populations. Incorporating what is known about effective teaching for linguistic as well as culturally diverse minority children is a daunting yet necessary task, as growing numbers of newcomers bring their linguistic resources to the city schools. An in-depth study of language production in social settings of TWI programs is also called for, as the presence of virtually four languages, Ebonics and Spanglish in the playground and English and Spanish in the classroom invite us to rethink how to make bilingual education available and achievable for all constituencies.

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