

The implications of social policy and ideology on bilingual education

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Abstract

Throughout the world, bilingual education programs have experienced both positive and negative changes which have been influenced by both social policy and ideology. This has led to a wide range of bilingual programs with dramatically different aims and characteristics. Social policy and ideology can be a powerful force of change and by highlighting some of the challenges and achievements of bilingual education in various countries the link between social policy and ideology in regards to the support, planning and success of bilingual education are clearly revealed. By understanding the role of social policy and ideology the success of various bilingual programs can be dramatically improved.

Key words: bilingual education, social policy, ideology, political policy

The history of bilingual education is complex and like other types of education it has been influenced by a range of factors. John Edwards, who has focused on the sociology of language, has suggested that bilingual education is more than just applying research and theories, but is also linked to social and political assumptions. (Romaine, 1989) Without positive support the planning and success of bilingual programs is usually limited. Social views influence the status and choice of language programs, the way programs are evaluated and even how research is interpreted to support current opinions within society. This article will show that bilingual education is a socializing force that responds to public opinion even though it may not be the actual leader of change. By referring to bilingual education programs in various parts of the world, the implications of developing and evaluating such programs will be discussed, and examples from several countries will be highlighted.

Types of bilingual education programs

Throughout the world a diverse range of bilingual programs have been established, abolished and adapted to meet the changing needs of society and political agendas. Baker (1993) suggests that there are ten different types of bilingual programs that exist and each has distinct social and educational aims and language outcomes. These bilingual education programs can be divided according to their aims regarding bilingualism.

The weak forms of bilingual programs include: submersion (structured submersion), submersion (with withdrawal classes), segregationist, transitionalist, mainstream (with foreign language teaching), and separatist forms of education. On the other hand strong forms include immersion, maintenance, two-way/dual language, and mainstream bilingual programs. (Baker, 1993, p.153)

The diversity of bilingual education programs can be linked to various sociocultural, political and economic issues which can best be explained by highlighting the direction of a few key programs including; transitional, maintenance and enrichment programs. First of all, the transitional model is known to be linked with language shift, cultural assimilation and social incorporation while maintenance programs on the other hand not only maintain language ability but also strengthen cultural identity and the affirmation of civil rights. However, the enrichment model leads to language development, cultural pluralism and social autonomy (Hornberger in Freeman, 1998) and is increasingly common in the U.S. and Canada. By looking at the goals of these programs it is possible to conclude that political and social groups have strongly influenced their direction but does not appear to be the only factor. To a minor extent, developments in research have instigated changes in teaching methods to focus more on contextual and sociocultural language situations in addition to discourse acquisition (Miller, 2004).

Support for bilingual education

By looking at examples of bilingual education it is possible to provide evidence of how social policy and supportive ideology directly impacts bilingual education. Currently, bilingual education is seen as a valued resource by the public in many countries. Most people believe the ability to use a language fluently for trade, social and intercultural understanding, science and technology is a useful asset. As Nunan points out:

“English is currently the undisputed language of science and technology, and scientific journals in many countries are now switching from the vernacular to English.” (Nunan, 2003, p. 590)

The support of English language education in Asian countries has led policy makers to increase bilingual education programs. Even when a government report in Hong Kong indicated that 70% of school children were unable to cope with English as the medium for education, the value of bilingual education and the opinion of local citizens towards bilingual education in Hong Kong did not change significantly. (Nunan, 2003)

Japan has also seen a change in bilingual education that has been influenced by changing views on language education and globalization. Over the past ten years, the variety of

languages offered at universities and some high schools has slowly increased as well as the variety of language courses that are offered on NHK. Furthermore, an increasing number of immersion kindergartens and public kindergartens with English programs have been established to answer the current demands of parents.

However, in countries with large migrant populations such as Australia and the U.S., the value of multiculturalism has generally led to positive attitudes towards multilingualism. In these countries the expansion of bilingual and foreign language education has been encouraged, but at the same time majority languages have often been more valued than minority languages.

Many societies have supported bilingual education in periods when there has been no risk to the status of the majority language speaker groups. Australia is one example of a country that has had social and political support for bilingual education rapidly change. From the 1850s, Australia saw an increase in religious and secular schools that provided bilingual education and a high standard of education. (Clyne, 2003) During this period of openness, between 1850 and 1870, Australian society also valued German for business and even supported regular circulations of German newspapers. However, such support quickly changed during World War I and World War II when the use of languages other than English became unacceptable. It was not until the 1960's before support re-emerged for bilingual education due to major changes to Australian society that required the introduction of ESL. The transitional programs that were introduced into schools aimed at building the communication skills of migrants to later assimilate into the monolingual education system. Interpretation and translation facilities were also inadequate for the growing multilingual society which led to the support and need for bilingual education. Now in the 21st century, Australians generally view language ability as a vital asset and support bilingual education.

The impact of government policy

Community support for bilingual programs can easily be reinforced by changes in national policy. In the 1970s, Australian support for bilingual education once again grew when Australia's assimilation policy changed to a multicultural policy as a result of changes to social and political thinking. The new aim was to develop Australia into a cohesive, united, multicultural nation. This led to the "recognition of the rights, cultures and languages of all groups within Australian society, and the acknowledgement of the various cultures". (Clyne, 2003, p. 19) Such changes have occurred in many countries which have changed the direction of education policies.

The ethnic rights movement and social equality became key issues within social and political policy. This made it possible for the establishment of Bilingual Education Acts in the U.S. in 1968 and 1988. Similar policies were constructed in other countries. Such laws enabled various groups to get mandated bilingual programs or appeal on the basis of civil rights. (Romaine, 1989) However, sometimes support for bilingual education has only facilitated a pattern of maintenance or assimilation into the dominant mainstream culture, instead of creating integrating programs that the whole community can benefit from. This can be observed in language programs for migrants in Australia or Germany. Corson (1993) suggests that quality bilingual programs have only recently been established and produced balanced bilinguals and implies that such success is linked to political, economic and social support.

The negative impact of social policy and ideology on bilingual education

Lack of support for bilingual programs can be seen in many countries but some examples from the U.S. and Australia are worth highlighting. In the past, national identity has often been linked to language and considered a vital part of becoming an ‘American’ or ‘Australian’. In the U.S., the majority language English is strongly linked with liberty, freedom, justice and wealth, and it is socially valued, while other languages have been associated with terror, injustice, poverty and other societal problems. (Baker, 1993) Such images can not only influence the developers of programs but also the learners themselves.

Furthermore, minority groups have sometimes missed out on bilingual education merely due to the fears of the majority language group. Groups against multiculturalism and multilingualism have attempted to delay and prevent bilingual programs. Some Anglo-Americans support English only programs because of concerns about the status of Latinos and their growing economic and political power. Some feel it is a threat to their position and authority and creates “competition for perceived scarce resources.” (Baker, 1993, p. 394) Ultimately such views lead to further tension and decreased support for bilingual programs.

Special interest groups such as US English, have pushed for making English the official language for public use and demanded the creation of English Language Acts by claiming that bilingual education has had a negative impact on the acquisition of English, and recommends that students should be integrated into mainstream programs. (Romaine, 1989) Other groups have tried to counteract such claims, including the NABE (National Association for Bilingual Education) and emphasized the positive benefits and value of

bilingualism with varying degrees of success. It is often the groups that need bilingual education the most such as migrants or temporary workers who are unable to make demands about rights. But this is also complicated further by the attitudes of different minority groups and their feelings towards the teaching of their mother tongue and language maintenance.

Many countries have experienced periods of intolerance towards bilingual education when social policy became a part of political policies. In Japan, the suppression of the Ainu language in the northern islands eventually led to its virtual extinction, although in recent years there has been attempts to teach Ainu by activists even with a lack of governmental support. But, with little support from the education system or from the local community the past experiences of many countries has shown us that it is difficult to maintain such programs.

The development of different types of bilingual education programs

In some cases minority language groups may fight for bilingual education programs to be developed to answer the needs and demands of their community. However, even when the ideology of a nation has changed to support bilingual education there has constantly been limits to the degree of support and influence on the development of programs. When multiculturalism became a key word, bilingual education appeared to be getting more support but in reality the type of bilingual programs that were acceptable were transitional, anti-poverty measures rather than something that would become a personal and national resource. Romaine (1989) provides an example of a country which only supported transitional bilingualism due to federal regulations and that country was the U.S. in the 1960s. During that period students would change to mainstream English only instruction and did not receive an education that would aim to maintain the home language. (Romaine, 1989) Therefore, there has been no escaping the social and political forces that have helped produce the type of programs that become available.

The role of dominant language groups

If the majority language group is tolerant towards ethnic diversity then the outcome on planning is clearly positive. In the case of bilingual education planning Hymes suggests that decisions are connected to cultural values and social hierarchies. (Hymes cited in Miller, 2004) The types of programs that are made available depend on the role language groups have with the government and whether or not they are a minority group or not. If a group wants more bilingual programs to be introduced they may have to negotiate changes to their status. (Romaine, 1989) If the views of the dominant group are positive

towards bilingual education and see it as a right and resource, facilitating national cohesion, cultural integration, a way of achieving unity in diversity, or as a basic right, the planning and execution of the program will be relatively trouble free. But if the dominant group considers bilingual education to be negative, and the cause of problems either individual (related to education, society, or status), or likely to create national disunity due to cultural, economic and political breakdown, then the program is likely to receive less support, be limited financially, and be less available.

Resource Allocation

Bilingual education planning is further complicated by the lack of resources for all languages which leads to the division of resources due to status and group density. In some cases it may be a lack of qualified teachers and in other cases it may be resources or access to resources. Such factors are further exasperated by frequently changing social policies and ideology that vary in support for bilingual education. Baker provides a good example of the financial challenges which face program development in South America. “In South America, it is costly to produce the full range of educational resources (for different ages, curriculum areas, and ability levels) for the 11 official languages. Yet to privilege one or more languages over the others will be at a cost to the speakers (e.g. less educational success) and the languages themselves (e.g. language shift).” (Baker, 1993, p. 387) In some cases, planners may choose to find cheaper and easier bilingual programs rather than consider the rights for everyone if there is little resistance from the public.

Successful bilingual programs

The success of current bilingual programs is closely tied to the opinions and values of the society and their aims for multiculturalism, multilingualism and internationalization. Success of programs may be linked to the “value of native speakers and non native speakers, standard language, competence, language affiliation, language inheritance, linguistic and cultural knowledge” (Miller, 2004, p. 115). However, key factors for the success of bilingual programs are the views and opinions of people. The speakers must be motivated to invest time and energy to learn their languages and apply their language skills. Although there may also be views that are embedded into the “subconscious assumptions of teachers, planners and politicians” (Baker, 1993, p. 384), these views will also influence the progress of the programs. Therefore, people must unite and work together in order to create successful bilingual programs. Some countries have achieved this with a great deal of effort and support and one country worth mentioning would be Canada.

Canadian bilingual programs have been highly evaluated worldwide due to their success in producing balanced bilinguals and their success in handling contrasting social views and political agendas. Canada has experienced a similar change in population and multicultural development that is comparable to Australia. But unlike Australia, Canada has a history of tension between French and English speaking Canadians. The bilingual programs that have been established there attempted to deal with this tension by equalizing French and English at the federal level but in doing so they weakened the position of community languages. (Clyne, 2003) The status of French and English became an issue due to rising French nationalism in Quebec during the 60's and 70's due to the growing importance of French as a means of business communication throughout Canada. They were also present in greater numbers with 5 million out of 6 million Quebec residents being French Canadians. (Genesee, 1987) This threatened "to disrupt the established socioeconomic equilibrium" by favoring French-English bilinguals over monolingual English speakers; French Canadians have traditionally been more bilingual than English Canadians and therefore stood to benefit from this linguistic change." (Genesee, 1987, p.153) The Canadian programs are generally considered successful since they have achieved their goal of answering the demands of Canadian society without threatening the status quo of the powerful English Canadian community. Their bilingual programs also serve to maintain economic status and have been supported by community.

The Australian government on the other hand, has tried to offer a range of community languages such as Italian and Vietnamese and trade languages such as Japanese and Chinese. Even though Australia has declared to maintain multiculturalism and multilingualism on the surface of Australia's national identity is still tied to Anglo-conformity. (Cummins, 1990, p.15) In regards to the U.S., its approach is also different. Bratt-Paulston suggests there are two major differences between the bilingual programs of Canada compared to American Title VII bilingual programs. She claims the American programs are for lower class children from socially stigmatized ethnic minority groups and the Canadian immersion programs are for the middle class children from the Anglo majority; a socially and economically powerful group. (Bratt-Paulston, 1992, p.71) Others see American bilingual education as "a balancing mechanism that compensates for the children's linguistic disadvantage and thereby maintains societal equilibrium." (Genesee, 1987, p.152) Economic status and program goals may be key factors in the evaluation and comparison of the success of the bilingual programs in the U.S. and Canada. If a society is not demanding the development of balanced bilinguals from a bilingual program it is

very likely the bilingual programs available will not have those aims either. Research has tended to show bilingual education only really benefits middle class children but in reality they might just be fulfilling the expectations and limitations of the society where the program is being carried out. Each country highlighted in this article has strived for very different kinds of bilingual education. In order to successfully evaluate any bilingual education program the social views and political agenda that are influencing the bilingual education programs must be clearly understood.

Understanding the social views and the political agenda of a nation is a vital key towards understanding the direction of bilingual education. Various types of bilingual programs have been developed to respond to changes to ideology and social policy. Governments are directly involved in the planning, support and maintenance of bilingual education programs by controlling funds, resources and accessibility to programs. Despite this, majority and minority language groups can influence policy making by insisting their views and making demands to policy makers. Hence, there is little doubt about the complex and influential role of social policy and ideology on the support, planning and success of bilingual education programs throughout the world and with this in mind we can work towards more successful bilingual education programs in the future.

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