

THE BATTLE OVER BILINGUAL EDUCATION

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[Assignment: In a 5-7 page essay, take a stand on a debatable public issue and convince your readers that your position is right.]

(1) When Ana Daisy Peralta arrived in this country from the Dominican Republic at age 14, the only language she knew was Spanish. All of her 9th grade classes at New York's Louis D. Brandeis High School were taught in Spanish except for reading and a special course in English as a second language. Now in her 20's, Daisy, as she is known to her friends, says she "understood a lot" of English after just six months in the United States. In her second year of high school, Daisy was placed in her first "mainstream" class with English-speaking students. By the 11th grade, all of her classes were in English, except a Spanish-language elective, and she was reading English at the 12th grade level.

Today, Daisy is a graduate of Georgetown University, fluent in both Spanish and English, and an American citizen. (Glazer 126)

(2) In the context of American public school programs since 1968, bilingual education refers to the instruction of children who do not speak English by a teacher who uses their language in part of the instruction (Glazer 129). The debate over whether the U.S. should provide bilingual education programs in their public schools for Spanish-speaking children is a heated one. There have been countless studies conducted by many different groups, and the results are varied. The programs studied are far from perfect, but most of the results they produce are positive in the support of bilingual education. And considering the huge number of Hispanics annually entering the U.S., we need a way to educate them so that they do not end up being unable to function in American society. Therefore, bilingual education should be offered in the U.S. not only because of the success of many of the programs, but also because it is necessary to successfully educate our Hispanic population.

(3) When it comes to bilingual education, perhaps the first question people ask is, "Is it necessary?" And the public has a right to question, considering that tax money supports many of the programs. A New York Times editorial stated that "The best way to help immigrants is to help them become insiders as fast as possible" (Sanchez 88), and bilingual education certainly is an important attempt to help Hispanic children become "insiders" by teaching them English and eventually

mainstreaming them into all-English classrooms. Simply allowing Hispanic children in the U.S. to speak only Spanish, or, on the other end of the spectrum, putting them into all-English classrooms and expecting them to learn without instruction, does not work. The former ignores the children's need to learn English altogether, and the latter expects them to learn English without ever being taught. Anne Lewis believes that there is no doubt that the poor performance of Hispanic children must, at some point, be related to their lack of skill in English. (99). The simple fact is that Hispanic children living in America do need to be taught English.

(4) Perhaps the most important question concerning bilingual education is "Does it work?" Studies find that bilingual education is indeed successful. A recent review of some 60 studies concluded that although children in bilingual education programs lag behind children taught exclusively in English in their first two years in the program, by their fourth year they outperform their counterparts from all-English classes on standardized tests (Glazer 133). The author of the review, Virginia T. Collier, associate director of the Center for Bilingual, Multicultural and English as a Second Language Teacher Preparation at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, says, "the concern that children are leaving bilingual education programs without knowing English 'is basically a myth'" (Glazer 133).

(5) Some opponents of bilingual education argue that the programs put too much stress on the native language and that they do not mainstream the children into English-speaking classrooms soon enough. To that, Alicia Coro, director of the Department of Education's Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs, answers that the legislation behind bilingual education "does not say to produce bilingual children. It says to teach in the native language 'to the extent necessary' to teach English" (Glazer 129). In other words, the true goal of bilingual education is to teach English.

(6) Other opponents of bilingual educational programs argue that keeping up with one's native language, as is the practice in bilingual education programs, is a hindrance to the students' learning of English. Kenji Hakuta and Laurie Gould's research refutes this argument. They state that the maintenance of one's native language does not slow down the development of a second language (41).

(7) Bilingual education programs are not only important because of the effective way in which they teach English to Hispanic children, but also because they aid in the children's socialization process. The criticism that bilingual education programs isolate non-English-speaking children from English-speaking children who should be their friends and should be helping them

learn English is not necessarily true. Lily Wong Fillmore states that young children can play, have fun, and even "talk" together with very little solid knowledge of each other's languages (Hakuta and Gould 42). Furthermore, in addition to facilitating social interaction between the Hispanic and American children, bilingual education programs go much deeper than simply teaching English. They also "give an institutional boost to minority-group children's self-esteem" (Hakuta and Gould 43). The benefits of bilingual education certainly reach further than many realize, in social aspects as well as educational.

(8) A major argument against bilingual education is one that is not unfounded. This argument criticizes bilingual education for keeping students too long in the program, even after their English is considered "adequate" (Hakuta and Gould 40). It is true that Hispanic children often stay in the programs for longer than the "expected" 2-3 years. It seems, however, that there is much more to bilingual education than simply teaching English. Arturo Vargas, senior education policy analyst for the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic lobbying group in Washington, D.C., says there are two goals in bilingual education: "to teach English and to teach everything else children need to learn" (Glazer 131), which means that students may possibly benefit from staying in the programs even after they have acquired language skills. It is not necessarily best to push children quickly through a bilingual education program. J. Cummins, author of numerous studies in bilingual education, found evidence that "while children may pick up oral proficiency in as little as two years, it may take 5-7 years to develop the skills necessary to function successfully in an all-English classroom" (Hakuta and Gould 40). So, bilingual education should not be thought of as holding Hispanic students back in their learning of English, as its original goal never was to push children into mainstream society before they were ready; rather, its purpose was to give language-minority students a superior education (Wong Fillmore 476)--one that promotes academic excellence, not force-fed English.

(9) Possibly, the most challenging and thoroughly proven argument against bilingual education deals with the scarcity of qualified teachers. It is true that the lack of trained teachers causes a great problem for native language instruction (Lewis 100). And the availability of well-trained teachers surely is an important factor in the effectiveness of most programs (Glazer 135). Many areas of the country that need bilingual teachers simply are not able to get them. Yet, despite the problems, there have been positive gains in recent years. Bilingual education laws have recently made their teacher-requirement laws stricter to help reduce the number of poor programs. California, a state leading in Hispanic population, is also the leader in

these laws which aim to make the bilingual programs as effective as possible with well-trained teachers (Glazer 135). Also, on the optimistic side of this story, despite a shortage of teachers, many areas of the country with largely Hispanic populations do not have problems finding teachers who are fluent in both English and Spanish (Glazer 135). Nevertheless, for all the gains, the problem of finding enough bilingual teachers "to go around" still persists.

(10) Perhaps one way to have more teachers trained bilingually is to increase their opportunities to obtain the training they need and to increase the salaries of these special teachers, both through tax money. The objections to such an idea would, most likely, be more than numerous. U.S. English, an organization that disagrees with the National Association for Bilingual Education, says, "keeping up with one's native language is fine, but not at the expense of the taxpayer" (Glazer 131). It is a shame that this organization sees bilingual education programs only as a way of "keeping up with one's native language" when that is not at all the purpose of bilingual education. It's obvious that the tax money would be much better spent paying for superior education opportunities for Hispanics than for welfare when these people find that they have no way to learn English and, therefore, become uneducated, dependent citizens of America.

(11) In order to counter the arguments against bilingual education, many supporters of the programs are quick to point out that, according to much psychological and linguistic research, many of the common concerns about bilingualism in children are unfounded. In general, the research supports the use of the native language in the instruction of Hispanic children. (Hakuta and Gould 43). Bilingual education is also wrongly blamed for problems caused by other factors. Joshua Fishman, University Research Professor of Social Sciences at Yeshiva University in New York, says, "Many of the problems popularly attributed to bilingualism are problems of social and economic development, control, and incorporation, superimposed on ethnological, racial, and religious differences. Without these factors, problems of communication are solved, rather than created by bilingualism" (Glazer 138).

(12) Bilingual education supporters are fighting for what they believe to be a necessary opportunity that should be offered in this "land of opportunity." Without bilingual programs, the Hispanic-American population could become an isolated population, and Spanish-speaking children may become far less likely to ever learn English to a full extent.

(13) The American public may argue that these Hispanics never should have entered our country in the

first place. But the simple fact is that they are here, and if they can be taught English, they will be far more likely to succeed here--perhaps even to the great extent that Daisy Peralta did. In the same manner, without bilingual education they may well end up illiterate and dependent on the U.S. for their survival. Lily Wong Fillmore, a true supporter of bilingual education, makes a strong point in saying, "Society owes its children the best education it can give them, and it would not be inappropriate to begin by seeking educational excellence for those with the greatest need" (480). It is high time we put away our prejudice and began thinking about the good of our country and everyone who is a part of it.

Works Cited

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