

CONSORTIUM OF SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATIONS

---

---

# COSSA WASHINGTON UPDATE

---

---

Volume IV, Number 6  
March 22, 1985

## THE FUTURE OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

In recent weeks, several prominent officials, including Secretary of Education William Bennett and former Senator S.I. Hayakawa, have stated their views on the status of and prospects for bilingual education in the U.S. Both believe the aim of bilingual education should be to bring people into the mainstream.

Kenji Hakuta, Associate Professor of Psychology at Yale University, and Russell Campbell, Professor of Applied Linguistics, UCLA, offer the following comments on the future of bilingual education.

"The future of bilingual education in the United States has been haunted by controversy over its ultimate goal ever since Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968. The naive observer might think that American bilingual education has been a fortress for the goal of native language maintenance and resistance to mainstreaming into a monolingual English society. This could hardly be farther from the truth. The key question is whether the goal of programs that employ the language of the minority students should be maintenance of the non-English language and culture, or maximally efficient transition to mainstream English classrooms. President Reagan remarked in 1981 that 'it is absolutely wrong and against American concept [sic] to have a bilingual education program that is now openly, admittedly dedicated to preserving their native language and never getting them adequate in English so they can go out into the job market.' More recently, William J. Bennett, in his first press conference following his confirmation as Secretary of Education, said that bilingual education should be aimed at 'getting people into the mainstream.' (Washington Post, February 13, 1985) These remarks are consistent with congressional testimony by U.S. English, an organization founded by S.I. Hayakawa that advocates Constitutional protection of English, that 'at the very least, bilingual education retards the acquisition of English language skills, and the integration of students into the American mainstream.'

"However, bilingual education as currently practiced in fact provides for rapid transition to English. One national study, for example, found a three-fold drop in enrollment in bilingual education programs among language-minority students between elementary and middle schools, reflecting a high rate of mainstreaming. Typically, the modal length of stay in such bilingual programs is

between two and three years. Since all indications are that current bilingual education programs are serving as effective transitional mechanisms for assimilation of language minority students, the advocate of an English monolingual America could hardly have chosen a better-suited program. This may underlie the results of several recent public opinion surveys of attitudes toward bilingual education that reveal substantial support for the transitional model.

"Research in second language acquisition argues for prolonging the period in which students receive instruction in their native language even if the goals of the program were transitional. Skills such as reading transfer from one language to another, so that the student is not learning to read in the native language at the expense of reading in English. As long as these students will learn more from instruction in their native language than in English, bilingual instruction seems advisable. Furthermore, there is great variation in the rate at which different children learn their second language, depending on factors such as personality and aptitude. It would be wise to allow a more comfortable period for second language development to take place, particularly since recent research shows that the use of language in academic learning is different from language used in conversation, and takes considerably longer to develop. A student judged to be ready for mainstreaming on the basis of conversational English may not yet have developed adequate English skills for academic learning.

"These research findings also bear on the advocacy of maintenance bilingual programs. Such goals for bilingual education are not in conflict with so-called 'mainstream' American ideals, since fully functional bilingualism can be attained at no expense to English. Research shows that it is wrong to think of the two languages of the bilingual in competition for limited mental space (an old view deriving from empiricist notions about language). Rather, they are interdependent and build upon each other. Recent research on the effects of a developed bilingualism in children shows that they enjoy not only the benefits of knowing two languages and literatures, but added cognitive skills and awareness about language as well. We have successfully debunked the long-held belief, rooted in work at the turn of the century on the intelligence of immigrants, that bilingualism results in mental confusion. Should we choose to value the resources of the non-English languages with which the language minority students come to school, we need only to continue providing these students instruction in their native language even as they progress in English.

"Language demographics show rapid mother-tongue loss among the nation's language minorities. As the non-English languages of the United States are being displaced, fueled by the policy of transitional bilingual education, the nation is increasingly becoming aware of its inadequacy in foreign language skills, a deficiency that has repercussions for commerce and national security. It is paradoxical that the schools are succeeding in eliminating minority languages, yet failing to produce functional bilinguals through their foreign language programs.

---

"A lesson to be learned for foreign language education from research in bilingual education is that a second language is learned well when effectively integrated into other areas of the curriculum. One promising method of achieving this, the effectiveness of which is being evaluated in San Diego, uses Spanish as a medium of instruction for native speakers of English. At the same time, the school interlocks this program with an ongoing bilingual program for native speakers of Spanish, so that the two groups of students serve as linguistic resources for each other. Such approaches -- integrating and supplementing bilingual education programs for minority students with innovative attempts to teach foreign languages to majority students -- are presently the most promising avenues towards the creation of a language-competent America."