A Reflection on parents' attitude towards bilingual education. A case study of Castilla y Leon, Spain

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Abstract

Bilingual education is being increasingly implemented in the educational syllabus. In spite of the increasing number of studies that document the benefits of learning curricular subjects in a second language, there is a great deal of controversy regarding how this educational method is being applied. The overriding goal of this essay is to analyse the parents' attitude towards the bilingual education program in Castilla y León. To this end, over two hundred parents were surveyed between 2015 and 2016. I consider parent's opinion of remarkable importance in order to understand the effectiveness of the bilingual program, as well as to have a complete assessment of its implementation and the consecutive strong influence exerted on children.

Key words: bilingualism, education, assessment, Castilla y León, fieldwork.

Resumen

Cada vez son más los centros que optan por incluir el programa de educación bilingüe en su currículo. A pesar de ser numerosos los estudios que destacan los beneficios de aprender materias curriculares en una lengua diferente a la materna, existe una controversia sobre cómo este sistema de educación se está implantando. El objetivo principal de este ensayo es analizar la opinión de los padres ante el programa de educación bilingüe en Castilla y León; para este fin, más de doscientos progenitores fueron encuestados durante los años 2015 y 2016. Considero que la opinión de las familias es de notable interés para comprender el grado de efectividad del sistema bilingüe, tener una valoración más completa sobre su puesta en práctica y por el grado de influencia que ejercen los padres en los niños.

Palabras clave: bilingüismo, educación, valoración, Castilla y León, trabajo de campo.
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1. Introduction

English is an important communicational tool among people from diverse cultures and languages. It could be suggested that in the twenty first century as we head towards a more globalized world, language has become an integral part of society. Crystal states that English has been chosen as a “truly global language” (26). However, the majority of the Spanish population, who have a below average communication skills in English, are unable to obtain resources that will enable them to fit within a globalized world. According to the study carried out in the Estudio Europeo de la Competencia Lingüística EECL, published by the Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deporte, most Spanish students do not achieve a medium level of English above the B1 in Common European Framework of Reference for Language (48). Furthermore, the international company Education First in a recent research, which analyses the English levels of individuals both written and orally, has ranked Spain 19th in a list of 27 European countries. However, significant changes in attitudes toward language education have been observed in Spanish society, which will probably improve the average level of English students. One of the biggest challenges for the Ministry of Education and Science and the different autonomous communities has been the implementation of the bilingual education system. The British Council School in Madrid introduced a pilot program in 1940 called the “Bilingual Educational Program”¹.

This program has been an inspiration for the integration of English within the curriculum course content.

¹ “The British Council School was established in Madrid in 1940, at a time when Europe was facing the challenge of the rise of fascism. We have always offered a bilingual and bicultural education, underpinned by our objective to develop future citizens with core values of loyalty, flexibility, resilience, caring and challenge.” (The British Council “HEAD OF BRITISH COUNCIL SCHOOL MADRID, SPAIN” January 2016- http://www.nabss.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Appointment-Brief-compressed.pdf)
The government has invested resources in both materials and teacher training to promote bilingual education of English among young individuals. Furthermore, Spanish society is now facing a very different reality from previous decades, since English has become an integral element to partake within the global society. Having a good command of English is a compulsory tool to access to labour market. The world largest recruitment agency Adecco surveyed 1947 Spanish workers, 61,3% of them concluded that English is the most demanded language by entrepreneurial sector in job interviews (1). As Kristina Cunningham explained in the Multilingual Education Congress, held in Salamanca October 2014, “a broad knowledge of English will allow greater cohesion in the national labour market and a more adaptable workforce ”. (G. Barnés)

It has become apparent that Bilingual education is a challenge that the Spanish population must overcome to reach the linguistic level of our European neighbours. The Castilla and León community, aware of this reality, has been promoting since 2006 different educational programs which stress the importance of bilingualism and foster the teaching of English from three years old onwards. Since it is a new educational paradigm within society, parents have become increasingly anxious about this new method of teaching English. This has given rise to many questions, worries and opinions about how bilingual education will be implemented. The purpose of this paper is to gather and analyse the parents’ opinions regarding the bilingual education programs in Castilla and León.
2. Theoretical Background

Bilingualism has been defined by Centro Virtual Cervantes as the ability of an individual to communicate independently and alternately in two languages. Experts have gathered several distinctions on cases of bilingualism. The early or initial bilingualism, refers to a child who is taught two languages at the same time from an early age; consequently, the child can acquire the use of the second language similarly to the mother tongue. On the other hand, the bilingualism in a natural context that refers to a child who acquires the L1 and then the L2 through immersion in the context where that language is used. This second type implies a partial bilingualism, because the child requires a period to learn the second language. Lastly, bilingualism which is acquired when an individual intentionally learns a second language with posterity to his/her mother tongue. This usually implies the existence of some mechanism of instructional character. This last case is closely related to the bilingual education that I will investigate in this paper.

Bilingual education states “the use of two or more languages as mediums of instruction for ‘content’ subjects such as science or history” (1). Hence the second language becomes both a curricular subject (EFL) and a means of learning content in other subjects. As a result of teaching simultaneously in and through English, students are enabled to engage with communicative exchanges in a ‘natural’ speaking environment that facilitates the authentic use of the language. David Marsh states: “The language classroom is essential for the learner to understand the ‘nuts and bolts’ of language – the architectural plans. But there is rarely enough time in the classroom for the language teacher to go beyond this

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2 “El concepto de bilingüismo se refiere a la capacidad de un sujeto para comunicarse de forma independiente y alternativa en dos lenguas (“Bilingüismo Individual.” Centro Virtual Cervantes. Diccionario online de términos claves de ELE. Instituto Cervantes. n.d. Web. 15 April 2015.)
essential part of the learning process. Learners need time to build things with the ‘nuts and bolts’ – to build the house which they see in theory on paper.” (3)

If bilingual education is successful accomplished, many positive attributes can be perceived. These benefits included cognitive advantages as:

The brain processes more efficiently information and staves off cognitive decline.

. . . The enriched cognitive control that comes along with bilingual experience . . . metalinguistic awareness (the ability to recognize language as a system that can be manipulated and explored), as well as with better memory, visual-spatial skills, and even creativity (Marian and Shook 8-9).

In addition to the cognitive advantages outlined above, there are numerous studies that enumerate communicational and cultural advantages in bilingual children as it enriches the possibilities of expression and communication while increasing the breadth of vision to foster a spirit open to diversity. As Crozet and Liddicoat pointed out: “Culture is embodied in the ways in which people interact with each other in everyday forms of talk and through the written texts they produce.” (15)

Despite this, it appears that there is no consensual opinion pertaining to bilingual education. The continued debate discussing whether bilingual education is effective or not has made it a controversial issue. However, there are hardly any studies regarding the satisfaction of bilingualism. Most of the existing researches are focused on the opinion of the teachers highlighting: María Lova, María José Bolarin and Monica Portos’ study (2013)³ which analyses educators’ point of view in the community of Murcia. A similar

³ Lova’s research is the “result of a research aimed to know the ratings of teachers of the Primary Bilingual Programme in the Region of Murcia. . . . The main results show: increase in coordination of teachers, improvement the image of the school, positive attitudes of students towards English language and a perceived increase in the English level of students.” (Lova, Maria, María José Bolarín, and Mónica Portos.
research published by the UGT union in the community of Madrid (2014)\(^4\) examines a professor’s degree of satisfaction, analysing the quality of the system and the preparation they have had.

Just as the previous studies are interesting and necessary to improve the bilingual program in Spain, it is necessary to know the degree of satisfaction among parents in order to improve the bilingual system. As Mina Patel states: “We need to support our students. We talk a lot about policy and planning, we talk a lot about teachers, and very often I don't think we talk enough about the students themselves. When I talk about support for students I am talking about support parents”. Peeter Mehsto suggests that a parent’s influence on their child is an imperative element of a student’s willingness to learn through this method due to a “correlation between parental attitudes and understandings and the student”.

The aim of this study is to find out the parents’ point of view of the Bilingual Education in Castilla y León, as they are witnesses of the implementation of the bilingual method. By knowing their opinions, worries and suggestions, we will know if this method is being applied correctly or even figure out what could be failing in this new educational program.


\(^{4}\)“Son mayoría entre los docentes encuestados quienes no consideran el actual modelo bilingüe de la Comunidad de Madrid adecuado y creen necesaria una modificación del mismo.” (“Resultados de la Encuesta al profesorado sobre el Programa Bilingüe de la Comunidad de Madrid.” FETE-UGT Madrid. 2015. PDF. 16 June 2015.)
3. Case Study

I have investigated parent’s opinion through a survey conducted to a wide group of parents of elementary school children from Salamanca. I took a sample of 207 parents with varied gender, age, social class, or education level (N=207), in order to obtain unbiased results.

I used personal surveys to collect quantitative data as it provides, in a standardized way, accurate information on several variables of interest for my research; as well as it is the most effective method since the respondent has the interviewer presence that can help to answer questions. The survey consisted of a total of 6 questions that measure the degree of satisfaction with distinct aspects of the bilingual system. Furthermore, two open questions were included to obtain diverse responses in parent’s own words. These responses are not simplified into agree or disagree answer, consequently it helps to know more accurately parents point of view. The answers related to these two open questions have been summarized and grouped by similitude. A sample survey can be found in Annex no.1.

The survey results have been collected and converted into percentages for each answer. I utilised a common rounding to one decimal place, to show clearest data. The results have been graphically interpreted in a circular pie chart, where the reader can easily understand and interpret them. To ensure the comprehension of my research, an analysis has been carried out underneath each question.

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4. Outcomes and Analysis

4.1. Question 1: Are you for or against bilingual education model implemented in Castilla and León?

The result of this question, which can be seen in Figure 1 shows a set percentage in favour of bilingualism (46.9%) facing 45.4% of people who speak out against it. This tight result makes obvious the uncertainty and doubts of many parents about the bilingual system. In fact, many commented while they were doing the interview that in deed they were in favour of bilingualism, but not in the way it is programmed.

4.2. Question 2: Do you think that the hours of the second language should be reinforced?

Much of the respondents (73.4%) said that the second language hours should be reinforced. (Figure 2)
4.3. Question 3: Do you think that instead of this program, the acquisition of L2 should be reinforced by the presence of Native Language Assistant?

Most respondents (76.8%) believe it is important the presence of a language native assistant in the classroom, compared to a small percentage that are considered expendable (14.5%) (Figure 3.)

Having a prepared language assistant is an important help in the process of learning and acquisition of the second language because it allows the students to use the L2 in a natural context focusing on oral ability. Moreover, the presence of a language assistant adds an extra motivation for students since it stimulates children’s interest about the second language\(^6\).

\(^6\) "La labor de un Auxiliar de Conversación tiene una gran importancia en el proceso de aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, porque despierta en los alumnos la curiosidad y la motivación por la lengua de estudio, sirviendo de modelo para su uso en situaciones comunicativas y aportando una visión..."
In addition, the incorporation of a native conversation assistant favours the intercultural awareness and tolerance toward other cultures and customs. According to Dr. Robyn Moloney:

The Assistant is an individual with first-hand experience of the cultural life of the target language, who is able to bring that knowledge to the students through personal narrative and anecdote in a vivid and personally engaging way. The Assistant represents dynamic culture as it is lived and shared, rather than as fixed, exotic and distant . . . , students can develop awareness of the differences and similarities between the Assistant’s life and their own lives (4).

![Question 3: Survey Results](image)

Figure 3

4.4. Question 4: Do you think that students who have been taught in bilingual education plans are equally prepared than those who have attended to curricular subjects in Spanish?

The outcome of this response is very meaningful, because it values the results of the bilingual system. As shown in Figure 4, 72.5% of respondents believe that bilingual students are not equally prepared as those students who have studied the curriculum subjects in Spanish. Only 16.1% of parents consider that this bilingual system allows students out equally trained.

![Question 4: Survey Results](image)

4.5. Question 5: Do you think that there is a linguistic deficit in the Spanish language for students who learn curricular subjects in other languages?

51.1% of the respondents do not believe that the participation of their child in a bilingual class causes a deficit in the Spanish language. However, 41.5% think that in
subjects such as natural science result in a loss of specific vocabulary. This concern has also been found out in question number 7.

Following Cummins research about Bilingualism: “Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language” (3). Therefore, children who study natural sciences in their schools in English, should not lose the vocabulary of the subject if “parents and other caregivers (e.g. grandparents) are able to spend time with their children and tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts” (4). In addition, the basic curriculum subjects studied in primary are related to each other, so it can be understood in their mother tongue.

4.6. Question 6: What do you think should be evaluated in curricular subjects taught in another language?
Most of the parents (72.9%) believe that the assessment must respond to the balance between knowledge and language. While the 19.8% believes that only knowledge should be assessed. Only a minor percentage of the parents (7.2%) believes that the evaluation must be based only on language.

![QUESTION 6: SURVEY RESULTS](image)

**Figure 6**

Bilingual assessment has the same aims than traditional one. The assessment must corroborate if the goals have been achieved: it must control the level of capability, measure and analyse the procedure and the results obtained by the students. Nevertheless, in traditional method, the language was studied as a set of grammar rules, vocabulary, writing skills etc. (ELF). But in bilingual education, the language is used as a mean to learn the content. As Maggi states: “The focus is on meaning, so language is not regarded as a set of rules and the ability to separate and study on their own, but as a resource for creating meaning in a communicative context” (5). So, the assessment should integrate a balance between language and content. In order to achieve it, as Kiely points out: teachers should
"accumulate valuable information on the way pupils make progress through the curriculum. They identify achievements and difficulties of individual children, and use differentiation to set appropriate tasks and recycle learning opportunities as required" (8).

4.7. Question 7: What worries you most about the bilingual system?

As the graphic below shows, there are different opinions with respect this inquiry.

![Question 7: Survey Results](image)

In analysing the data, I have found that 31.4% of parents were apprehensive about the lack of content in subjects, when their children are taught in English.

A total of 24 people (11.6%) were concerned about their children's comprehension deficiency of the Spanish language, as they are only learning specific terminology in English. (Refer to question 5)
15.9% of the respondents were troubled about teachers’ academic preparation. Necessary requirements for bilingual teachers vary according to each region. But in general, it is requested teacher’s control of: the general language, which is everyday language; academic language, which is the language closely related to the school (e.g. pie charts, evaluation, grid etc.) and subject language that is related to the area (e.g. in natural science class words such as: solubility, evaporation, endocrine system etc.). Teachers should have as well a solid base of the area he/she is going to teach.

24.3% of respondents request the presence of a native to impart these subjects. The predilection for a native speaker as an ideal teacher leads to the creation of a linguistic concept known as the “native speaker fallacy”\(^7\). This predilection in the pedagogical domain is more doubtful, since the fact of being natives does not provide them with the skills and educational training required in language teaching. Certainly, multilingual teachers have broader language awareness, since the first language can be considered a resource due to the fact that that bilingualism can provide them with an ability to “build a cognitive bridge to the second language” (Canagarajah 80). Moreover, they instilled in the pupils the curiosity towards the language, the ability to intuit linguistic rules and they promote an “I can” attitude.

9.2% of parents feel anxious that their children are memorising words instead of gaining full understanding of the said topic; the memorization of the content it is not an isolated fact of the bilingual system. Memory and learning are overlapping processes interactively. Ideally, all teaching plan would be that the students could see the link

\(^7\) “Phillipson (1992, 1996) uses the phrase “the native speaker fallacy” (the belief that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker) to refer to unfair treatment of qualified NNESTs” — Lee, Cheu-Jey, “Native versus Nonnative: A Literacy Teacher Educator’s Story”— *Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne*. 1. Web. 08 April 2017
between theory and reality. But it is not always possible, so teachers should use teaching resources to promote the learning process and approximate the alumni to the reality. Some of the most used resources are: flashcards, videos, board games created by the teacher or computer programs such as JCLIL.

9.2% believe that the bilingual system is not useful. A part of learning vocabulary in the second language, students acquire early oral and written fluency. Furthermore, as I could personally check, assisting to a bilingual class in San Agustin’s School in Salamanca, students who are taught within a bilingual plan are more easily able to maintain a natural conversation in proportion to their age and level.

Finally, 7.7% have other concerns which cannot be encompassed by the above, such as the precocity of this education. However, teaching a second language in the early years, the so-called critical period, was somewhat futile has been active for years, nonetheless recent studies claim that the most optimal age to start learning an L2 is in the first 4 years of life because they can develop their language skills, assimilate better all languages (including the mother tongue) and know other cultures and ways of thinking that can help in their overall development.

4.8. Question 8: when your child is doing his/her homework. Do you feel frustrated by not being able to help your child?

58.5% of respondents claim that they feel frustrated when they try to help their children with homework. Conversely, the 41.5% declare not feeling frustrated when they cannot help their kids.
Parental involvement is essential for educational achievement. But, being involved does not mean doing the homework as it may be detrimental to their child’s education. As Robinson and Harris’s claim “once children move beyond primary school, parental help with homework can bring test scores down.” (16). Thus, parents shouldn’t feel a sense of frustration because of lacking the required English skills to help their children with bilingual homework.

**Figure 8**
5. Conclusions

This study has highlighted the parents’ perception of the bilingual education system in Castilla and León in order to determine the efficacy of the system. The evidence which I have collated proposes that parents support the bilingual education to a lesser extent. However, the ambivalence which was discovered within my research suggests that there is a real lack of communication towards the parents. Thus, it leads to parent’s mistrust and concerns of how bilingual education is being implemented.

The knowledge of the bilingual education system was limited therefore, I consider it essential to present my study to the parents who were hesitant with the topic, as their knowledge is key to influence a positive notion towards the younger generations’ attitude towards bilingual education.

While useful and meaningful, the results of this research must be viewed with caution because of the small sample of the population. This fact deduces that the survey must be practiced to a wider demographic in order to obtain a more accurate result; whilst enacting my investigation of this topic further questions were raised as for example the non-bilingual teacher’s attitude towards this program or how the government is coaching all the eligible teachers. However due to the constraints of my research it was not possible to extend my investigation further.

Furthermore, it is necessary to carry out further variable comparative analysis to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of bilingual education and to enhance the aspects that are not giving the anticipated results. To proactively focus on the concerns of the parents which I have surveyed, a comparative evaluation and comparison between children who have
been taught using bilingual methods and the individuals that have followed a more ‘traditional’ education in their native language should be enacted.

Another area that should be studied is the teachers’ opinion about the bilingual system. While I was doing this research, I attended to a school in order to have first-hand insight about education. I surveyed different teachers to know their opinion about the bilingual education program and I could see a gap between those teachers who had knowledge about a foreign language and those who did not. I consider the opinion of the teachers of paramount importance, since if they are not sure of what they are imparting, this can affect the opinion of the students, as well as the quality of the system.
Works Cited


Appendix 1

Encuesta sobre Bilingüismo a padres

1. ¿Está a favor o en contra del modelo de enseñanza bilingüe implantado en España?
   a. A favor
   b. En contra
   c. NS/NC

2. ¿Cree que en vez de este modelo de enseñanza se debería haber potenciado o reforzado más la L2 con una mayor cantidad de horas semanales?
   a. SI
   b. No
   c. Ns/nc

3. ¿Cree que en vez de este modelo de enseñanza bilingüe se debería haber potenciado el aprendizaje de la L2 con la presencia de auxiliares de conversación?
   a. SI
   b. No
   c. Ns/nc

4. ¿Cree que los alumnos que han cursado programas bilingües salen igual de preparados en las asignaturas curriculares que aquellos que las cursan en castellano?
   a. SI
   b. No
   c. Ns/nc
5. ¿Cree que existe un déficit lingüístico de la lengua castellana en aquellos alumnos que imparten asignaturas curriculares en otros idiomas?
   a. Sí
   b. No
   c. Ns/Nc

6. ¿Qué cree que se debería de calificar en las asignaturas curriculares impartidas en otro idioma?
   a. Idioma
   b. Contenido.
   c. Un balance de idioma y contenido.

7. ¿Qué es lo que más le preocupa del sistema bilingüe?

8. A la hora de realizar los deberes, ¿Se siente usted “frustrado” al no poder ayudar a su hijo?