



UNA PERSPECTIVA HISTÓRICA DE LA EDUCACIÓN BILINGÜE EN ESTADOS UNIDOS

Resumen: El presente artículo presenta una revisión de la evolución de la educación bilingüe en los Estados Unidos. Así pues, presentamos una sinopsis de los principales movimientos que han estado en contra y a favor del bilingüismo.

El respeto por la diversidad cultural y lingüística empezó a verse comprometido a partir de 1750 cuando Benjamin Franklin llevó a cabo el primer intento de imponer el inglés como el lenguaje oficial de los Estados Unidos. La oposición más fuerte al bilingüismo vio la luz en 1983 a través de un movimiento conocido como *U.S. English*. En 1986 aparecería otro movimiento con las mismas intenciones que *U.S. English*, el llamado *English First*.

No obstante, el bilingüismo también ha tenido sus defensores, tales como el movimiento llamado *English Plus*. A su vez, el futuro del bilingüismo también se ha visto protegido de forma legal a través de tres actas gubernamentales: (1) *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, (2) *Bilingual Education Act of 1968* y (3) *No Child Left Behind Act*.

Palabras clave: Educación bilingüe; Estados Unidos; perspectiva histórica.



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Abstract: This article presents a revision of the evolution of bilingual education in the United States, focusing on the main movements that have been against and in favor of bilingualism.

Respect for cultural and linguistic diversity started being jeopardized in 1750 when Benjamin Franklin tried to impose English as the official language of the United States. The strongest opposition to bilingualism took place in 1983 with a movement called U.S. English. Another movement, the so called English First, appeared in 1986 with the same objectives as U.S. English.

However, bilingualism has also had its proposers, such as English Plus. The future of bilingualism has also been legally protected by three acts: (1) the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), (2) The Bilingual Education Act of 1968, and (3) the No Child Left Behind Act.

Keywords: Bilingual education; United States; historical perspective.



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1.- INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism has had a long tradition in the United States, at the same time that it has been very controversial. Even though nowadays there is a large linguistic diversity in the United States and many states are in favor of bilingual education, the history of the country reveals that there have been periods of time in which this did not happen.

This article describes the historical circumstances that have determined the evolution of bilingualism in the United States. Thus, we first present an overview of some of the most significant attempts to eliminate linguistic diversity and declare English the official language of the United States. Next, we present some of the laws that have contributed and currently determine the future of multilingualism in the United States. The last section focuses on the present legislation that shapes the nature of Bilingual Education.

2.- LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF THE UNITED STATES

The term *melting pot* is attributed to the United States to illustrate the various linguistic and cultural backgrounds of its citizens. On July 4, 1776, the committee congress (represented by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson) proposed the creation of a motto to symbolize this diversity. The original phrase selected was *E Pluribus Unum*, which is the Latin phrase for *Out of many, one*. The main goal of this motto was to symbolize the American determination to build a single nation from a group of states.



Immigration trends in the United States have deeply changed since Ellis Island was officially opened on January 1, 1892. Annie Moore, the first documented immigrant arriving to the United States, was from Ireland. From the 19th century until mid 20th century most immigrants were of European origin. Nevertheless, as it appears in the 1965 amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act, “more than 85% of all immigrants today come from Asia and Latin America” (Curtin, 2009, 5-6). Furthermore, while considering linguistic diversity, we cannot disregard the fact that Native Americans were living in the *New World* before the immigration started. According to Crawford (1995), by early 1664 there were more than 150 different spoken languages belonging to 15 families of American Indian languages. Unfortunately, the addition of new European languages carried the eradication of several Indian dialects. As a natural consequence from this array of inhabitants, the United States became a country with an enormous linguistic variety (Kloss, 1977). Nevertheless, we must state that although many different languages were used in one community, the most frequent language used in school was German:

German-speaking Americans were operating schools in their mother tongue as early as 1694 in Philadelphia. Sometimes bilingual and sometimes not, German-language schooling prevailed until the early 20th century, notwithstanding periodic attempts to replace it with English as the medium of instruction (Crawford, 2005, 82).

From a historical point of view, socio-economical factors were not associated to bilingualism. In the words of Crawford (2005, 81),

Bilingualism was common among the working classes as well as the educated, especially in the middle colonies of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. In the mid-18th century, newspapers advertisements for runaway servants, both black and white, made frequent reference to their bilingual or trilingual proficiencies.

At the time the constitution was framed and signed, not only was linguistic diversity a predictable and normal outcome of immigration, but there was not a language that would hold a higher status over others. Furthermore, Judd (1987, as cited in Lewelling, 1997) informs about how the founding fathers of America had no intention of setting any official language because of several reasons: “A belief in tolerance for linguistic diversity within the population, the economic and social value of foreign language knowledge and citizenry, and a desire not to restrict the linguistic and cultural freedom of those living in the new country”. Nevertheless, along the history of the United States, English-only movements have put together their every effort to make English the official language.



3.- OPPOSITION TO BILINGUAL EDUCATION

3.1.- Early stages: from 1750 to 1920

In the 1750s, Benjamin Franklin created a missionary group called *The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge*. In these schools, students were instructed only in English. When parents speaking other languages rather than English, especially those speaking German, realized that the real intention of these schools was to impose the use of English and to eliminate the use of any other languages they withdrawn their children from those schools (Crawford, 2005, 82).

In the nineteenth century, some states started prohibiting the use of other languages in schools. Wisconsin was one of the first states to mandate English as the only language of instruction in 1847 (Crawford, 2005, 86). A few years later in 1868 most Native American languages started their way towards extinction by forcing Native Americans children to receive instruction only in English, as a consequence of *The Indian Peace Commission* (Crawford, 2005, 86).

However, during the second half of the nineteenth century and until 1917 new territories became part of the United States (Guano Islands, 1856; Alaska, 1867; Cuba, Philippines and Puerto Rico, 1898; the U.S. Virgin Islands, 1917). Consequently, and as an attempt to promote unification, law makers began to issue laws to ensure that all Americans would have something in common, a new official language in their new country.

At the end of the 1890s, paradoxically, and disagreeing with one of the reasons that brought the Pilgrims to the United States, freedom of religion, an anti-Catholic secret society called American Protective Association (APA) would strive to set language impositions as a way to eliminate Catholicism. Parochial-school education, which in most cases used to deliver instruction in German, would be frequently attacked by APA. In the words of Crawford (2005, 86), “in 1889, Protestant schools became unintended victims when Wisconsin and Illinois enacted the APA’s proposal to mandate English as the sole language of instruction in all schools, public and private”.

In 1906, the government required that all male immigrants pass a test of fluency in English to become American citizens. This emphasis on becoming American through the assimilation of language and culture had a devastating effect on bilingual education (Leibowitz, 1971), which was emphasized in 1917 when the United States joined World



War I against Germany. The anti-German sentiment prompted many schools to stop delivering instruction in German. Crawford (2005, 89-90) reminds us that

Governor James M. Cox of Ohio sought legislation to remove all uses of German from his state's elementary schools, public and private, arguing that the language posed "a distinctive menace to Americanism, and a part of a plot formed by the German government to make the school children loyal to it". The state legislature quickly approved Cox's bill.

Later on, all languages, other than English, were banned in schools. In fact, in 1919, the state of Alaska issued a law that forbade the teaching of foreign languages. The three main sections of this law could be outlined as follows:

- a) Nobody is allowed to instruct any subject, whether in a public or private institution, in any other language that is not English.
- b) No other language but English can be used to teach any student until that pupil has successfully graduated from the eighth grade.
- c) Anybody disobeying the law will be subject to a fine that will vary from \$25 to a \$100 or could be taken to prison.

A year later, a teacher called Robert T. Meyer was taken to trial for disobeying this law. While working at Zion Parochial School, he used a German bible for teaching religion and reading to a ten-year-old student. When the Hamilton County Attorney came into the classroom and saw how the student was reading in German, he immediately accused Mr. Meyer of violating the 1919 Law that prohibited the instruction of foreign languages. Mr. Meyer appealed to the Supreme Court and won the case in 1923. The Supreme Court concluded that the Law was unconstitutional since it violated the Fourteenth Amendment, which, among other things, guarantees people's freedom and rejects any impositions based on race. This is known as the *Meyer v. Nebraska Case* (Singh and Jones, 2006, 111).

3.2.- The "English only" movement

In 1923 President Theodore Roosevelt would defend the adoption of English as the official language of the United States. He declared that

We have room for but one language in this country and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house (Roosevelt, 1926, 554).



Thus, the first official language legislation at the federal level attempted to declare ‘American’ as the official language of the United States, as indicated by Baron (1990):

This was a tongue-in-cheek assault on Americans who valued English literary traditions more than their own. It was not taken seriously by Congress. But the proposal was adopted that year in the state of Illinois, where Irish American legislators saw an opportunity to embarrass the British Empire. In 1969, Illinois quietly replaced “American” with English as its official tongue.

These ideas were present in different parts of the country for several years. In 1980, when the Mariel boatlift brought thousands of Cubans to the county of Dade in Florida, bilingual education would no longer be uphold:

Dade County, Florida, voters approve an “anti-bilingual ordinance” prohibiting the expenditure of public funds on the use of languages other than English. Fire safety information pamphlets in Spanish are prohibited, Spanish marriage ceremonies are halted, and public transportation signs in Spanish are removed (Crawford, 1992b).

In 1981, Republican Senator of California, S. I. Hayakawa, introduced the *English Language Amendment* into the US Congress, proposing English as the official language of the United States. Later on, in 1983, urged by an increasing concern about language barriers problems, Hayakawa founded the *U.S. English* movement with the help of Dr. John Tanton. As Crawford (2005, 133) cites, “the U.S. English message was simple: our common language is threatened by the ‘mindless drift towards a bilingual society’”. The main goal of this movement was to set an official language with the intention of creating a common mean of communication that could contribute to the unification of the United States. Hayakawa would painstakingly campaign that bilingualism could never have positive outcomes in the development of a country. In the following years, and in spite of the fact that the amendment never became official, many states adopted English as their official language (Ricento, 1996).

A new immigration bill was created in 1984 under the amnesty program. According to this new law, a certain level of English proficiency is required in order to become eligible for permanent residency. However, the US House of Representatives failed to agree and this law was never approved (Crawford, 1992a, 91).

Things started to change in 1985, when the Republican Secretary of Education William J. Bennett delivered a speech where he questioned the usefulness of bilingual programs and advocated for the full implementation of English as the only language of instruction: the so called “sink or swim” approach. Furthermore, he requested the



elimination of the prerequisite that bonds federal money (coming from the Bilingual Educational Act) to the use of native language as a mean of instruction. In order for a school to be eligible for the federal money, there had to be a bilingual program in place which targeted the specific needs of the students in attendance (Crawford, 1992a, 91).

3.3.- *The transition from the “English only” movement to Bilingual Education*

The Spanish-American League Against Discrimination, as a reaction to Bennett’s speech, created the *English Plus* movement. Crawford (1992a, 217) offers a fragment of the letter sent to Bennett:

We fear that Secretary Bennett has lost sight of the fact that English is a key to equal educational opportunity, necessary but not sufficient. English by itself is not enough. Not English Only, English Plus!

Bennett is wrong. We won’t accept English Only for our children. We want English plus. English plus math. Plus science. Plus social studies. Plus equal educational opportunities. English plus competence in the home language. Tell Bennett to enforce bilingual education and civil rights laws you enacted, or tell the President he cannot do his job. English Plus for everyone!

English Plus supporters emphasized the importance of bilingualism and advocated for the creation of bilingual programs that attend the needs of English Language Learners (ELLs); not only school children, but also adults (Padilla *et al.*, 1991). Lewelling (1997) presents a synopsis of the main characteristics and goals of the *English Plus* movement, which campaigned for giving all US citizens the opportunity to not only become proficient in the English language but also in one or more languages. Allowing for this linguistic plurality would benefit both native and non-native English speakers:

- a) In the case of citizens who have a mother tongue different to English, they are granted the opportunity to keep their first language while developing English as a second language.
- b) Native English speakers are presented with the challenge of learning different languages while improving and developing their first language.

English Plus believed that part of the reason why non-native English speakers have problems acquiring the English language is not because of a lack of motivation or interest, but as a result of not having enough opportunities. Furthermore, English Plus perceived bilingual education and bilingual services (such as interpreters in the case of emergencies, multilingual medical services, multilingual exams, multilingual ballots,



etc.) as a way to eliminate social disparities and discrimination. Therefore, English Plus followers recognized and valued the importance of acquiring English proficiency while living in the United States. Nevertheless, they opposed the idea, campaigned by followers of English only movements, of imposing official English and eliminating bilingual services since they believed it hampers basic individual rights of non-native English speakers (Lewelling, 1997). Crawford (1992a, 2-3) summarizes the controversy between English-only movements and their opponents:

For supporters, the case is obvious: English has always been our common language, a means of resolving conflicts in a nation of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Reaffirming the preeminence of English means reaffirming a unifying force in American life. Moreover, English is an essential tool of social mobility and economic advancement. The English Language Amendment would “send a message” to immigrants, encouraging them to join in rather than remain apart, and to government, cautioning against policies which could retard English acquisition.

For opponents, Official English is synonymous with English Only: a mean-spirited attempt to coerce Anglo-conformity by terminating essential services in other languages. The amendment poses a threat to civil rights, educational opportunities and free speech, even in the private sector. It is an insult to the heritage of cultural minorities, including groups whose roots in this country go deeper than English speakers-Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians. Worst of all, the English-Only movement serves to justify racist and nativist biases under the cover of American patriotism.

3.4.- *English First and its followers*

In spite of the English Plus movement that was moving towards Bilingual Education, in 1986, Larry Pratt, a conservative politician who at the time was a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, created *English First* (Crawford, 1992a, 92). Located in Springfield, Virginia, the three main goals of English First were the following:

- a) Make English the official language of the United States.
- b) Give every child the chance to learn English.
- c) Eliminate costly and ineffective multilingual policies.

English First is the organizational group that most strongly and vociferously rejects bilingual education. They are the only movement that went against the bilingual ballots in 1992, which was incorporated to the Voting Rights Act in 1975 (Bikales, 1986; Crawford, 1992a; Lewelling, 1997).



English First supporters assert that translating voting materials in other languages not only does not lead to a major voting turn out, but it also encourages fraud as well as serving as a discouragement to learn English (to mention but a few of reasons).

In 1988, Dr. John Tanton, co-founder of *US English*, delivered a memorandum that stated the importance of making English the official language of the United States. Furthermore, in this paper, Tanton warned about the problems that come with Hispanic Immigrants such as corruption (popularly known as ‘la mordida’), high levels of illiteracy, Roman Catholicism (with its potential to ‘pitch out the separation of church and state’), and high numbers of offspring (Crawford 2005, 136). Tanton justified this communication as one of his efforts towards reducing illegal immigration in the US. Tanton and Republican journalist Linda Chávez, who at the time was the president of US English, had to resign from their position when the organization was accused of receiving funds from eugenicist movements (Crawford 1992a, 93).

On August 1, 1996, the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to eliminate the federal requirement for bilingual ballots.

4.- PROPOSERS OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

In 2006, Congress reviewed the need for Bilingual Ballots. In spite of English only movement oppositions, Bilingual Ballots got approved for another 25 years:

In 2006, as Congress debated the future of bilingual voting rights, Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a California Republican, argued that “in every other country in the world where ... they have actually promoted bilingualism, it has led to balkanization of countries and hatred between peoples”. He called on fellow legislators to “vote against bilingualism”. In the end, Congress ignored his plea and chose instead to extend the law for another 25 years (Crawford, 2008).

The successful development of Bilingualism is to be found in the legislation of three main acts: (1) the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), (2) The Bilingual Education Act of 1968, and (3) the No Child Left Behind Act.

4.1.- *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted on April 11, 1965. It was designed by American educator Francis Keppel, who acted as Commissioner of



Education from 1962 until 1965. Through this act, the government allotted millions of dollars to districts with a large number of students coming from low income families attending primary and secondary education facilities. The goal of the funding was to:

- a) Guarantee professional development.
- b) Provide instructional materials, as well as, resources to support educational programs.
- c) Foster parental involvement.

The act has continuously been re-authorized every five years since its enactment.

4.2.- The Bilingual Education Act of 1968

In 1967, the Elementary and Secondary Act was reformed by Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough. According to Faltis and Hudleson (1998, 9), “its purpose was to provide federal assistance to local education agencies for setting up bilingual programs for poor, native Spanish-speaking children for whom English was a foreign language”.

The bill sought instruction in the native language along with ESL. Its intention was to bestow school districts with federal funds to create educational programs for students whose first language was other than English and who had limited proficiency in English. Thus, bilingual education gained prestige since it was considered the solution to the poverty and educational disadvantage that was affecting the development of the lower classes. Although the bill was first merely intended to serve Spanish-speaking students, by the end of 1967, a large number of senators requested these aid funds to be used not only with speaking Hispanics residing in the south western United States, but also with all low-income citizens and with all non-Anglophone groups that made up the population of this country. Senator Yarborough adjusted the language of the law in order to make sure this law could benefit all citizens in need of this help. Thus, bilingual education became a federal policy (Faltis and Hudleson 1998; Crawford, 2005). Faltis and Hudleson (1998, 10) further add that

Accordingly, during the first years of implementation, grants were awarded only to schools that: 1) developed and operated dual language programs for non-English-speaking students, 2) made efforts to attract and improve the skills of bilingual teachers, and 3) established communication between the school and the community being served.



4.3.- *The No Child Left Behind Act*

The current re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, proposed by President George W. Bush.

While preserving some popular ESEA programs, such as Title I assistance for ‘the disadvantaged,’ NCLB has created a complex new structure of goals, incentives, and penalties. Each state is required to develop accountability plans to move all students to ‘proficient’ levels of achievement in language arts, mathematics, and science by 2013-14. The plans must include a ‘timeline’ specifying ‘measurable objectives’ for adequate yearly progress (AYP) for students in general and for those who are Limited English Proficient (LEP), economically disadvantaged, belong to racial or ethnic minorities, or have learning disabilities. At least 95 percent of students in each subgroup must participate in annual achievement testing, which is mandated in grades 3-8. In addition, English learners must be assessed for English proficiency each year (Crawford, 2005, 354).

With respect to students’ achievement, the act is also very precise and details the threshold levels that should be reached, as well as the consequences derived from school failure. Schools are required to meet performance targets – not just overall, but for every subgroup of students – and to publish annual ‘report cards’ on student progress. Those that fall short of AYP or fail to test a sufficient percentage of children, even in one out of numerous categories, will be labeled ‘in need of improvement’ – and will be targeted for special help. Parents must be notified and be given the option of transferring their children elsewhere, with districts required to pay for transportation. Penalties will apply to schools that fail to meet AYP targets; being the ultimate one the reassignment of their staff, takeover by external managers, or closure of the school (Crawford, 2005, 354).

5.- CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Bilingual Education continues to be topic for discussion, and it is present in President Obama’s agenda. He proposes new measures in order to offer what is known as 21st century education. One of his goals is to have one of the nations with the highest number of graduates by the year 2020. With the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the government promises to invest more than 10,000 million dollars on education. These funds will be used to provide teacher preparation, to offer



interventions where the quality of the instruction does not meet the expectations, to reward schools and teachers who demonstrate academic progress, to improve the access to higher education, to assess students and programs through data analysis, and to support innovative projects.

Standardized tests and rewards are still in place, and it seems that they will be present in the next few years. Besides, states will compete in what is called 'Race to Top' to demonstrate they are innovative and offer the best to their students with the aim of receiving federal funds.

Considering that 25% of the current American population are of foreign birth or origin (Collier & Thomas, 2009, 9), we can state that Bilingual Education is an important (and sometimes controversial) topic in today's society. For American citizens, immigrants who are educated can threaten their work, culture, traditions and lifestyle. This might be one of the reasons why seven states (Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Wisconsin) prohibit bilingual education. However, we cannot forget that it is still happening in most of the states, where ELLs still receive services that value their native language and culture.



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