

# **Financial Benefits of Bilingual Education:**

An Overview of the Plights and Possibilities for Minority Speakers

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## **Introduction**

The educational disparity between speakers of majority languages and those of minority tongues is a well-known phenomenon. Minority speakers, particularly immigrants, tend to underperform academically, leading to a host of personal and societal issues. Forms of bilingual education have been identified which can help bridge the equality gap for these groups. This article overviews the conditions bilingual students find themselves in and how appropriate bilingual education programs can change these situations for the good of the individual and of society as a whole.

To begin, the paper proposes that the plight of these students has large, negative effects on both the minority speaker themselves and on society as a whole. With the importance of addressing this issue established, the option of bilingual education is explained and shown to be an effective method of change. Lastly, the benefits to both the individual and greater society are discussed in order to show that these programs are well worth the effort of implementation.

## **Why the Plight of Bilinguals Is Important**

Minority speaking students face many obstacles in their education. In the United States for example, native Spanish speakers have higher dropout rates, retarded education and higher incarceration rate (Ruhl p. 2, Hakuta & Snow p. 391). Moreover, this system tends to produce individuals who are barely literate in both their native language and the majority language (Hakuta & Snow p. 391). Thus, under served minority speakers are more likely to be in prison, have low paying jobs or depend on welfare systems (Ruhl p. 2). All of these options create a disproportionate burden on tax payers.

## **Why Bilingual Programs Are An Answer**

Many critics have questioned whether bilingual programs work any better than

submersion or ESL programs. The evidence here shows that *some* do. Others have been shown to be as effective as doing nothing. Cummins writes developing reading skills in the native language (L1) sympathetically helps the development of the same skills in the language of instruction (L2). But he cautions that these skills must continue to develop until the student has an adult grasp of each language. Transitional programs, which slowly phase out the use of L1 over 3 or 4 years, promote monolingualism and erode L1 proficiency. Thus, students are best served when they receive reading instruction in both languages each day (Slavin, 275). Many other measures such as using glossaries and extra time on standardized tests can bring minority speaking students up to the level of the majority students without bringing the latter group down (Abedi p. 9). These proven resources are a good replacement for many currently used programs, most of whom focus on cultural integration, which have little to no positive effect on student performance.

### **Benefits to Individuals**

While many proponents of bilingual education say it fulfills the student's basic rights to a meaningful education, there are important economic advantages to these programs. Both the individual and the society stand to gain from identifying and implementing effective bilingual programs and to move away from the standard immersion and ESL systems. The personal advantages begin by overcoming the basic disadvantages many minority speakers face. Competency in L1 is a good predictor in L2 competency (Cummins). That in turn provides the academic vocabulary needed to succeed in other subjects such as math and science (Cummins, Abedi p. 9-12). What this means is that there are measures to put minority speakers on a so-called 'even playing field.' More importantly, fluent bilingualism is correlated with higher academic performance, self-esteem and aspirations (Portes p. 4). Portes writes that these

increases result from both the proven cognitive benefits of competent bilingualism as well as the cultural aspects that come with the program. While being in a classroom that forbids one's native tongue tends to lower the student's self-esteem regarding their culture and language, while instruction which validates that language builds the student's sense of self-worth.

Greater academic accomplishment will lead to higher professional accomplishment. In Ruhl's assessment of Arizona's salaries, he shows that the high rate of dropouts and low performance cost minority speakers hundreds of thousands of dollars through out their lives (p. 2001). A male high school graduate will lose \$323,606 USD over twenty years compared to a student with *any* type of higher education. Dropouts will lose nearly twice that amount. Losses are lower for females but their salaries will be on average lower. The gender disparity in salary decreases as level of education increases. Ruhl notes what a massive loss this is for both minority speakers and the state of Arizona as 50% of Hispanics dropout due to "lack of effective bilingual and multicultural programs" (p. 2000). These numbers are massively disproportionate to the rest of the population. It is clear that without an effective bilingual program, schools are under serving minority speakers and depriving them of even the basic standard of education provided to other students.

Bilingualism is becoming an increasingly valuable skill on the job market. Researchers from the National Centre for Languages in the UK "found more than 2000 [job] requests for 20 different languages over a period of three months" (Adiyaman *et al* p. 13). Bilingual speakers have greater job prospects and have higher average salaries (Ribitzky, Padilla p. 22). Industries that are currently in need of bilingual employees include medicine, overseas sales, national security, immigration control and customer service. A report for the Commission to the European Communities specifically directs companies to use immigrants as a lingual resource (p.

18). Unfortunately, as discussed, many minority speakers finish school with little professional/academic fluency in their native home language. As long as education systems do not take advantage of the language skills minority speakers bring to their classrooms, students will continue to leave school disadvantaged rather than being able to use their bilingualism as an advantage.

### **Benefits to Society**

The social benefits will also be quite high. As stated above, bilingual employees are highly valued in the current globalized economy. The Commission of the European Communities reported that *at least* 11% of European businesses were losing business and contracts due to a lack of language skills. Half of all British companies are experiencing issues with languages and one fifth are losing business as a result (CiLT p. 6). Companies who have been proactive in adapting their products, labels and services linguistically have been increasing their business by £290,000 GBP annually while those who have not have seen a decline of £50,000 GBP per annum.

Lost business is not the only cost. Padilla reports that major international firms spend an average \$1,000,000 USD each year replacing employees who could not perform their job overseas (p. 21). Over half of these were caused by language and culture issues. Moreover, large markets are left virtually untapped by most American and European companies (CiLT p. 7, Commission of the European Communities p. 17). The UK currently does the same amount of business with Denmark as it does with all of South America. Languages like Mandarin, Russian and Spanish are the gateways to Eastern and Central Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Many developed countries currently have large populations of immigrants from some or all of these areas, yet have not made serious efforts to take advantage of these minority speakers'

natural skills. It is a gross oversight of business and government not to push for more effective bilingual education strategies.

## **Conclusion**

Investment in bilingual education is desirable for both individuals and societal forces like industry and government. Unfortunately, most of these students come from impoverished families who do not have enough resources or language skills to start a serviceable system of private schools, not to mention the legal issues many of them face due to illegal immigration. With this lack of economic ability along with industries' and unions' strong political influence in many countries, it seems to be in the best interest of everyone to mount a concerted political effort for change in regards to bilingual education. Used correctly, bilingual education programs could greatly benefit all parties involved.

We know bilingual students face tough challenges and that their struggles can negatively affect the population at large. We also know how to help them. Lastly, we know that these measures will not only help bilingual students gain an equal standing but will help them excel, to the great benefit of society. It seems simple to conclude that bilingual education is an effective choice for countries to add into their curriculum.

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