2004 Third Place Persuasive Research Paper

The Effects of Dual-Language Immersion Programs on Young Hispanic Students in the U.S.

Thesis statement: Although there is opposition to bilingualism in schools, two-way bilingual programs influence the self-esteem and relationships of individual Hispanic minority students with their parents, increase individual academic achievement among minority students (more so than other language education programs), and affect their relationships with and attitudes toward their majority peers.

I. Opposition against bilingualism in schools is of a political and social nature.
II. Two-way bilingual education positively affects the self-esteem of Mexican-American youth by building Spanish proficiency.
III. The two-way bilingual program has a positive influence on the relationship between Hispanic students and their families.
IV. These programs increase individual academic achievement among Hispanic minority students more than other types of language education.
V. Bilingual Education affects the relationships with and attitudes of Hispanic minority students towards their majority peers.

The Effects of Dual-Language Immersion Programs on Young Hispanic Students in the U.S.

Ana,¹ a fifth grader, shifts uncomfortably in her seat as she struggles to sound out words in a Spanish reader. Coaching her along, I help her sound out the words. As soon as we verbalize it together, a light comes on; she recognizes the word as one she knows. Ana is a Hispanic student learning to read in her primary language, one which she can already speak and understand orally, but is still developing in literacy. She is participating in a dual-immersion program for Spanish and English, also known as two-way immersion or two-way bilingual education, at a local elementary school where I volunteer.

Dual-immersion is a method of educating elementary students bilingually; the classroom and curriculum are organized so that native English-speaking students and English language learners (ELLs) together can learn subjects taught in both languages. According to Guadalupe Valdez, of Stanford University, the aims of dual-language programs are to help English-speaking children develop proficiency in a foreign language and to allow “children who do not speak English to benefit from having instruction in their mother tongue, as well as by

¹ Name has been changed.
interacting with English-speaking peers” (Valdés 392). One-on-one, I listen to each student read from a book in Spanish. In this classroom, there is a cross-section of native English speakers and ELLs learning and working together. Here they develop language and literacy skills in both their primary language and secondary language.

Successfully integrating non-native English speakers into the public school system and into society is a challenge the U.S. currently faces. By the year 2030, Hispanic students are predicted to make up the majority of public schools in California and Texas (Lara-Alecio et al. 35). In the 1990s, the Hispanic population in Salt Lake City, UT, increased by more than 50 percent (Frey par 13). There are many different options of how to face the challenge of successful integration. Research indicates that the most successful programs for the individual students are two-way bilingual programs implemented in elementary schools. Although there is opposition to bilingualism in schools, two-way bilingual programs such as this influence the self-esteem and relationships of individual Hispanic minority students with their parents, increase individual academic achievement among minority students (more so than other language education programs), and affect their relationships with and attitudes toward their majority peers.

Opposition to bilingualism in schools is of a political and social nature. Some people view dual-immersion as leading to further divisions in society, both social and economic. Some speakers of the majority language have negative attitudes towards immigrants and see bilingual education as “undeserved government assistance” (Baker and Jones 555). Even among the Hispanic population there are adverse opinions to dual-immersion education: one educator voiced her opinion that bilingual education was fine for Hispanic children but that dualimmersion was bad. She felt it wrong to give English speaking students the advantage of learning Spanish along with the Hispanic students and felt that the Spanish language should be kept as a cherished resource by the Hispanic community (Valdés 393). Although many people may share these attitudes, the reality is that there are many Hispanic children in United States public schools who benefit personally and directly from two-way bilingual education. Gibbons and Ramirez outline benefits of bilingual education in their book Maintaining a Minority Language: A Case Study of Hispanic Teenagers, stating that maintaining a minority language benefits not only the individual but also the family, the community, and the nation, giving the
individual higher proficiency in the majority language, a more positive self-esteem, and travel and employment opportunities (2).

Two-way bilingual programs moderately affect the self-esteem of individual minority Hispanic students. A study that analyzed the conditions under which Spanish proficiency affects the self-esteem of Mexican-American youth showed that Spanish proficiency has a strong, positive influence on the self-esteem of those who speak Spanish frequently with parents and attend school with a large number of minority students. The data also revealed that the family is a greater influence than friends on socializing and self-esteem for Mexican-American youth (Huang 1). In the classroom itself, bilingual programs give Spanish-speaking students an opportunity to shine and help their peers. In some classroom activities, native Spanish speakers act as group leaders because they have “greater language facility and an intuitive knowledge of Spanish grammar” (Howard 63). By implementing two-way bilingual programs, the public school system can increase Spanish proficiency as a useful heritage language among Hispanic youth. This will increase the self-esteem of much of the Hispanic student population and have positive effects on student involvement and, in turn, student performance.

The two-way bilingual program has a positive influence on the relationship between Hispanic students and their families. In her article, “Two-Way Immersion: A Key to Global Awareness,” Elizabeth R. Howard states that specifically in the border region of El Paso, Texas, many people “have family in both the United States and Mexico and interact daily with people from both countries” (64). In this case being instructed in both English and Spanish would help Hispanic students improve communication with their family members and relatives, developing stronger family unity. In other areas also, two-way bilingual education fosters positive “parent—school partnerships” (Lara-Alecio et al. 40). Having a bilingual program taught by a bilingual teacher will eliminate the “chasm between school and the home” felt between many Spanish speaking parents and English-speaking teachers; it increases cooperation among teachers and minority parents (Baker and Jones 537-540). Parents of Hispanic minority students will feel more comfortable getting involved in and actively supporting their child’s education if they have access to a teacher who speaks their primary language.

Hispanic students learning English perform better academically if they are enrolled in a two-way bilingual education program than if they are instructed only in English. Studies show that when ELLs are
provided with education in their primary language, they will perform better academically because a “strong grasp of their first language provides a solid basis for the acquisition of English literacy” (Greene; Willig; Eisterhold-Carson et al.; Lanauaze and Snow qtd. in Howard 62). Because students are learning subject matter in two languages, progress in a two-way bilingual program can be slow; however, these programs show greater long-term improvements. In one study on the literacy development of English language learners, the ELLs’ pretest scores were lower in some areas, but after one school year the academic gap between the ELLs in bilingual education and the mixed groups of students in mainstream education narrowed and there were “no significant differences between the groups” (López and Tashakkori 32). Virginia P. Collier analyzed studies made on bilingual education and came to the conclusion:

If a study is conducted for enough years (five or six), not only do the bilingually schooled students outperform their [ELL] comparison group, making much greater gains, but they begin to reduce the gap between their performance on standardized tests, achieving as high or higher than 50 percent of the native speakers on a given test. (qtd. in López and Tashakkori 21)

This shows that those Hispanic minority students who are learning both in their primary language (Spanish) and secondary language (English), specifically through two-way programs, are doing better academically than those minority students being educated only in English. It also shows that although scores may be low at the outset, long term results show much higher test scores for individual Hispanic students. J.D. Ramírez conducted a study of three types of bilingual programs (English-only, transitional, and late-exit) that give varying degrees of instruction in the primary language. From this, Ramírez concluded that if the ELLs are provided with “substantial instruction in their primary language [it] does not interfere with or delay their acquisition of English language skills, but helps them ‘catch-up’ to their English-speaking peers in English language arts, reading, and math” (qtd. in López and Tashakkori 21-22).

Two-way bilingual education affects the attitudes and relationships of Hispanic minority students with their peers. It gives both groups of students, the English speakers and ELLs, the opportunity to shine in the classroom. In dual-immersion programs, both groups act as “native language models regardless of the language of instruction.” Bilingualism and biliteracy in schools foster positive relationships among diverse racial and
ethnic groups, breaking cultural barriers while building communication and understanding in the community. Students of different language and culture backgrounds work together in “cooperative learning,” bringing their own knowledge and skills to contribute to the class (Howard 63).

Offering the students a better understanding of the cultures and experiences of their peers gives them an opportunity to appreciate the breadth of diversity in the world. Howard concludes in her research, “The best way to foster an appreciation of linguistic and cultural diversity is to give students first-hand experiences of them” (64). These first-hand experiences enrich a child’s education by fostering an open mind and positive attitudes toward diversity.

Two-way immersion programs are conducive to integration, rather than segregation. They do not segregate ELLs from mainstream education, but bring native English speakers from the mainstream into an integrated classroom. This setting is designed to balance the development of language with academic and social development without giving up one language or the other (Christian qtd. in Lara-Alecio et al. 38). Peer tutoring and learning both Spanish and English together create mutual respect for the traditions and backgrounds of both groups of students (Stencel 53). Two-way bilingual education benefits Hispanic minority students by developing their native language as well as English, while giving them the opportunity to help their English-speaking counterparts. This mutual cooperation develops attitudes that will have positive influences on Hispanic students’ education and their relationships with others in their communities.

The studies and research that have been gathered show that Ana’s education and relationships will be enhanced as she continues developing literacy and language skills in Spanish and English. If Spanish is the main language spoken in her home, which is likely, bilingual education will increase her self-esteem, and as she learns to read in Spanish, she will be able to share opportunities in literacy with her family. Because she has a bilingual teacher, she also has a greater chance for success in school because her parents are likely to become actively involved in her schooling. This will not only affect her education but also her relationship with her parents as she develops an appreciation for Spanish as a language of her heritage and develops skills which enable her to use it. As she successfully integrates into the public school system through dual-language immersion, her English proficiency will increase and she will have a greater opportunity to contribute to
society. In school, Ana will be able to perform better because she has had instruction in her native language as well as English and has been given opportunities to impart her knowledge of the Spanish language with the native English-speaking students. This opportunity to be a leader and tutor will help her to have greater self-esteem and more confident relationships with her peers. Dual-language immersion provides opportunities for Hispanic minority students such as Ana to develop attitudes, skills, and relationships necessary to become confident learners who spread a positive influence in a community of diversity and understanding.


