

Teachers' Beliefs and Knowledge About Bilingual Education

Preliminary Research Question 3C asks: How do teacher beliefs and knowledge affect literacy acquisition for English-language learners and language-minority youth and children.

The following section attempts to contribute to part of this question: What are teachers beliefs and knowledge about bilingual education?

Attitudes toward the underlying principles of bilingual education

A series of studies has been done investigating beliefs about bilingual education (for reviews of the research on attitudes, see Krashen, 1996, 1999). Shin and Krashen (1996) specifically investigated the attitudes of teachers and reported that their subjects strongly supported the principles underlying bilingual education: Most agreed that learning subject matter in the first language helps learning subject matter in the second language (which in turns helps English language development by providing more comprehensible input), and also agreed that developing literacy in the first language facilitates literacy development in the second language.

Their subjects ($n = 794$) had varying experience with ESL students and varying backgrounds. Shin and Krashen also reported a positive but low relationship between attitudes and the percent of LEP students teachers dealt with ($r = .19$), as well as second language proficiency.

Administrators also hold positive attitudes toward bilingual education (Shin, Anton and Krashen, 1999), as do graduate students in education (Lao, 2003; Ramos, 2003), and in bilingual education (Lao, 2003). Graduate students in other areas are less positive (Lao, 2003).

Parents of language minority children are also consistently positive about bilingual education (Shin, 2000).

Despite the cheerful conclusion, there are serious gaps in this research. No studies have been done focusing exclusively on currently practicing bilingual teachers. No studies have been done on the general public. Lao's results with graduate students in areas other than education suggests that they may not be as positive as educators and parents. If so, this would lead to the conclusion that those who are closest to bilingual education agree with its underlying principles more than those who are farther away or less involved.

Table 1: Responses to: Learning subject matter in the first language helps learning subject matter in the second language.

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subjects	support	not support	not sure
Teachers (Shin & Krashen, 1996)	70	15	15
Korean Parents (Shin, 2000)	47	44	7
Latino Parents (Shin, 2000)	34	33	33
Hmong Parents (Shin, 2000)	60	25	15
Vietnamese Parents (Young & Tran, 1999)	64	17	20
Administrators (Shin, Anton, & Krashen, 1999)	78	12	10
Education students in Spain (Ramos, 2003)	80	6	15
Education grad students (Lao, 2003)	60	12	29
Bilingual education grad students (Lao, 2003)	94	0	6
Grad students, other fields (Lao, 2003)	47	13	40

Table 2: Responses to: Developing literacy through the first language facilitates second language literacy development.

subjects	support	not support	not sure
Teachers (Shin & Krashen, 1996)	74	13	13
Korean Parents (Shin, 2000)	88	8	4
Hispanic Parents (Shin, 2000)	53	26	21
Hmong Parents (Shin, 2000)	52	30	14
Vietnamese Parents (Young & Tran, 1999)	76	11	14
Administrators (Shin, Anton & Krashen, 1999)	74	9	17
Education students in Spain (Ramos, 2003)	63	22	16
Education grad students (Lao, 2003)	65	13	22
Bilingual education grad students (Lao, 2003)	98	0	2
Grad students, other fields (Lao, 2003)	61	17	22

Table 3: The Mismatch: The Principles and the Practice

subjects	principles	Use L1 in school
Teachers (Shin & Krashen, 1996)	70	54
Korean Parents (Shin, 2000)	91	97
Hispanic Parents (Shin, 2000)	67	71
Hmong Parents (Shin, 2000)	82	92
Vietnamese Parents (Young & Tran, 1999)	64	82
Administrators (Shin, Anton & Krashen, 1999)	83	57

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Table 3 reveals a fundamental problem: For some groups, there is a mismatch between their attitudes toward the principles underlying bilingual education and the actual use of the first language in the classroom. Column 1 of table 3 captures attitudes toward the underlying principles, containing "agree" percentages for the aspect of bilingual education that subjects supported the least. The second column represents the percentage who agree that limited English proficient children should be in classrooms in which their primary language is used as part of the curriculum. In several studies, there was an interesting mismatch between attitudes toward the principles underlying bilingual education and actually doing bilingual education in school. While parents typically supported both the theory and the practice (Shin, 2000), teachers and administrators were more supportive of the theory than the practice. Seventy percent of teachers studied in Shin and Krashen (1996) supported the principles, but only 54% approved of the use of the first language in school among English learners. Similarly, 83% of administrators approved of the principles but only 57% approved of the use of the first language (Shin, Anton, and Krashen, 1999).

In several studies, respondents who agreed with the principles also felt that children would acquire the second language faster in an all-second language environment (Shin and Krashen, 1996; Shin et. al., 1999; Lao, 2003, Ramos, 2003).

These reactions could mean that respondents were not aware that bilingual programs actually use the underlying principles. They could, however, also mean that subjects felt that the effect of immersion was stronger than the positive effects of the use of the first language. If so, subjects might be aware of the theory but not the research, which consistently shows that children in bilingual programs acquire as much English as those in all-English programs, and typically acquire more (Greene, 1997. Oller and Eilers, 2002). This is particularly serious in the case of teachers and administrators, those directly responsible for educating language minority children.

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