

What is bilingualism worth?

By Rebecca Freeman and Else Hamayan

The fact that we are asked what bilingualism is worth and how much we should invest in it is an indication that we are far from being a society that values proficiency in two (or more) languages. Yet in this day and age we should be very concerned that, despite the fact that many students in U.S. schools speak a language other than English at home, few of these students graduate from high school with proficiency in that language. Since the early 1900s, immigrants have experienced strong pressure to assimilate to monolingualism in English. Even among the Spanish-speaking population today, we see clear evidence of an ongoing language shift toward English, despite the large numbers of immigrants that revitalize this language throughout the country. For the majority of immigrants, today as in the past, the native language is generally lost after three generations (Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001).

The cost to the individual of losing a native language is serious and significant. When children refuse to speak the language of their home, family, and community because English has more prestige, they can become alienated from these critical connections that help them understand who they are relative to others in the world. When children believe they must reject their home language and culture in order to participate and achieve in a monolingual, English-speaking world, they deny an important part of their sociocultural identity. They also limit opportunities that could be readily available to them if they were to maintain and develop their home language.

Contrary to popular belief, maintaining and developing the native language by no means hinders an English language learner's ability to acquire English. Add to that the evidence that shows tremendous benefits to bilingualism, both individual and societal. A wide range of research shows educational, cognitive, sociocultural, and economic benefits of bilingualism for the individual. Bilinguals tend to perform better than monolinguals on cognitive tasks that call for divergent thinking, pattern recognition, and problem solving, and they tend to demonstrate sophisticated levels of metalinguistic awareness. People who can use more than one language can generally communicate across language and cultural boundaries more effectively, and they generally have a wider range of professional opportunities available to them in the global economy (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000).

The evidence about English language learners (ELLs) in particular and Latinos in general demonstrates that these student populations score disproportionately low on standardized tests and drop out of school at disproportionately high rates (Genesee et al., 2005). At the same time, the evidence on well-implemented dual language programs (such as two-way immersion and one-way developmental bilingual programs) shows that these programs enable ELLs to close the achievement gap with their English-speaking peers in five to seven years

(Lindholm-Leary, 2000; Thomas and Collier, 2002). These data suggest that when schools have the linguistic resources available to implement dual language programs that lead to additive bilingualism and biliteracy, they are well worth the investment.

Promoting bilingualism is not only good for the individual, their families and the local community, it is good for the nation overall. According to the National Foreign Language Center,

“the United States has critical needs for genuine communicative competency in a range of languages, a level of competency that can rarely be attained by native English speakers in a classroom setting. The ethnic communities constitute a valuable and unique resource in producing true multilingual ability in English and languages that are essential to the national interest (NFLC, 1995, p. 1).”

Peyton et al. (2001) argue that a national policy that viewed these languages as resources to be preserved and developed rather than as obstacles to be overcome could contribute significantly and in a relatively short time to America's expertise in foreign languages.

Bilingualism is the expectation and the norm in most other countries in the world today. Many countries have language policies that promote the teaching of additional languages beginning in elementary school. Although there is no such language policy or expectation overall in the United States today, schools can challenge the assimilation process on the local level by investing in bilingualism. In our opinion, the benefits clearly outweigh the costs.

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