

# US Bilingual Education and Its Application to Japanese EFL Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Bilingual education in the United States has a rather different meaning than what we associate with when we hear the term “bilingual education” or “bilingualism” in Japan, where these terms more often than not mean “elite bilingualism” or “additive bilingualism” (Flores & Beardsmore, 2015), as being bilingual is considered an asset or a luxury. If you are bilingual, it usually means that on top of your first language (Japanese), which is also the society’s majority (mainstream) language, you speak another one, which is often English; “bilingual education” implies education for the rich and the elite.

While this could also be the case in some privileged contexts in the United States, the roots of US bilingual education invite us to think about its close connection to language-minoritized populations. It is true that bilingual education is now regarded as an asset by families from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including high socioeconomic background in U.S. society, and as a great educational alternative for their children. These families benefit from the version of bilingual education called “dual-language programs” that enroll students from both minoritized and majority languages and communities so that students learn from each other. Historically, however, even when developing dual-language programs, bilingual education has aimed at emphasizing its role to meet the needs of language-minoritized children through “diversity”, “equity”, and “social justice”. In other words, bilingual education in the school setting is especially concerned about meeting the learning needs of language-minoritized children, who are often recent immigrants coming to school with various linguistic resources from their communities, but who may have limited or no English language proficiency. While there are different models to implement bilingual education, its main purpose in the US schools is ideally to support children’s learning through two languages, with a commitment to help maintain their native language

while learning English, and by so doing, help them survive and succeed in the new country and the new society, while contributing to its diversity. This difference between bilingual education in Japan and in the US comes as no surprise when we think about the difference between the demographic makeup (i.e. the ethnic and linguistic diversities) of these two countries.

To date, in Japan, foreign language education has almost exclusively meant English education, and as the globalization process continues, the teaching of English draws more and more attention. The new course of study for elementary and secondary schools has been recently revised by MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, also known as MEXT), and English instruction is going to become one of the academic subjects for 5th and 6th graders (MEXT, 2017). All these changes are expected to boost the English proficiency of Japanese students and eventually that of the general public. This is all fine, but at the same time, a concern should be raised about the linguistic and cultural diversities in this country, especially in the school setting. Why teach only English when there is a rich variety of languages and cultures that we should cherish and learn from? We believe that the pursuit of effective pedagogy for English education in Japan lacks an understanding of the essential meanings of language and language education.

This paper reviews bilingual education in the United States to analyze the essential meaning of language and language education that can be derived from it, and attempts to see how we can apply the underlying concepts of bilingual education in the United States to the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) setting in Japan.

## **2. Bilingual Education in the United States**

### **2.1 Historical background**

Here is the historical background of the bilingual education in the United States, compiled in Menchaca-Ochoa (2006).

During the 19th Century, bilingual education for Spanish, French, and German was offered, in the Southwest, Louisiana, and the Midwest respectively. In the century that followed, bilingual education was divided into three major periods: The Assimilation Period (1900-1960), The Re-Birth Period (1960-1994), and The Reactionary Period (1994-Present).

During the Assimilation Period (1900-1960), the states that had implemented bilingual education in the 19th Century started to repeal it and enact laws mandating English as the language of instruction. In 1906, the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization established the ability of speaking English as a requirement for citizenship. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917, which required literacy in English or the native language of the immigrant in order to obtain

legal immigration. The beginning of World War I triggered and accelerated anti-German feelings and may have caused the initial wave of the English-only movement, prohibiting the use of languages other than English for instruction in elementary schools.

The Re-Birth Period (1960-1994) started when the Russians launched Sputnik in 1957. Shocked by the Russia's scientific progress, federal legislation was passed to emphasize math, science, and foreign language education in the US. The necessity to educate Cuban refugees who fled to Miami due to the Cuban revolution also helped establish bilingual education in the area around this time.

The Reactionary Period (1994-Present) started when California, whose bilingual students account for 30% of all English language learners in the United States, passed Proposition 227, which eliminated bilingual education in the state in 1998. Proposition 207, passed in the state of Arizona in 2001, was even more restrictive, making it almost impossible for school districts to offer any form of bilingual education, and establishing "Language Patrols" to supervise school districts to make sure they are following English-only instruction.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 neither prohibits nor encourages native language instruction, but the law was considered a step back for bilingual education in that it made no reference to bilingual education, bilingualism, or biliteracy. The principle focus of this law was to ensure that children acquire English as soon as possible, which literally ignored the children's primary language and left them unattended.

As stated at the beginning of this article, bilingual education in the United States was originally for language-minoritized children; helping these children is still its primary intention. While many policy makers and schools saw bilingual education simply as a way to transition immigrant children into English as soon as possible, other advocates have seen it and still see it as an additive educational model. Its main purpose is not only to help those children succeed in the new society by learning English but also to help maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage, while learning academic content, and by so doing, contributing to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the United States.

In November of 2016, California passed Proposition 58 with a majority vote (Los Angeles Times, 2016). This will allow public schools in the state to develop their own bilingual and multilingual programs, and English-only instruction will now be repealed in California.

## **2.2 Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University**

The first author of this article was fortunate enough to spend his one-year sabbatical leave at the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program of Teachers College, Columbia University in the City of New York from September 2015 thru August 2016, allowing him to revisit the essential meaning of language and language teaching in a new context. This section briefly looks at the conceptual frameworks of Teachers College and the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program, which helped him gain many invaluable insights into language and language teaching during his one-year stay there.

### **2.2.1 Teachers College**

The five stances identified in the conceptual framework of Teachers College, and that the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program promotes through its courses, are: Inquirers and Reflective Practitioners, Lifelong Learners, Learner-centered Educators, Effective Collaborators, and Advocates for Social Justice (Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program Guide 2015-16). Among these, “Advocates for Social Justice” is of particular relevance to bilingual education and the sociopolitical role that it plays.

The fundamental concept of Teachers College is also clearly shown in its website link entitled “Diversity and Community”:

Teachers College, Columbia University, strives to establish an institution that actively attracts, supports, and retains diverse students, faculty, and staff, demonstrated through its commitment to social justice, its respectful and vibrant community, and its encouragement and support of each individual in the achievement of his or her full potential (Teachers College Website).

A message to the same effect was also conveyed in the congratulatory speech given by Dr. Susan Fuhrman, president of Teachers College, at the Convocation in May 2016. Below are 12 excerpts from her short speech related to the institution’s view of “social justice”:

- “-expand educational opportunities for everyone including our most marginalized and vulnerable fellow human beings”
- “-dedicating your lives to the pursuit of social justice, TC tradition that literally goes back to the founder Grace Dodge”
- “-work with immigrant children and families”
- “-TC’s commitment to social justice”
- “-our work on social justice takes on renewed urgency”
- “-advance social justice”

- “-embody social justice tradition”
- “-pursuit of social justice is very much at the core of what makes TC great”
- “-cultural funds of knowledge”
- “-your quest for social justice”
- “-we have to do more to give access to marginalized children”

(Fuhrman, 2016)

These words clearly show that dedication and commitment to language-minoritized children are at the core of Teachers College at large.

### 2.2.2 Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program

The fundamental concept of the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program can be seen again on its website:

In our increasingly diverse world, the study of multiple languages-in-education is in high demand. The Program in Bilingual/Bicultural Education acknowledges the need to provide students with a foundation for understanding and working with bilingual learners in diverse educational settings. Our program specializes in education that privileges language minority student populations in the U.S. and in the world (Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program Website).

Furthermore, *Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program Guide 2015-2016* lists four conceptual areas that the Program emphasizes: children, families, and social contexts (especially related to language-minoritized or bilingual children); multilingualism, literacies, and cultures; policies, histories, and models of multilingual education and schools; pedagogies and assessments in multilingual education.

From these descriptions, it is clear that the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program focuses not only on bi/multilingualism and bi/multiculturalism, but also on language-minoritized students in the U.S. and the rest of the world. In this respect, the Bilingual/Bicultural Education embodies the conceptual framework of Teachers College as part of its identity.

In the next section, we will look at three courses that were offered in the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program during the fall and spring semesters of 2015-2016 and see how the program’s fundamental concepts are practiced in the classroom setting.

### 2.2.3 Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program courses

The first one is *Teacher Inquiry in Bilingual/Bicultural Education*. With the key words of “*Teacher Researcher*” and “*Qualitative Case Study*,” the goal of this course is for students to engage in an inquiry process about their teaching in bilingual settings or working with bilingual populations. The essential question to ask in this course is: What are the critical questions bilingual teachers think about when confronting the challenges involved in the process of teaching and learning? Through this course, students are expected to gain some understandings of how one can learn about themselves in the inquiry about others and vice-versa, how teaching in bi/multilingual, bi/multicultural settings requires on-going research, and how they can advocate for bilingual children when they can articulate both the research and practice basis of a phenomenon within bi/multilingual, bi/multicultural education.

Next is a course titled *Teaching Literacy in Bilingual Settings*, whose key words are “*First- and Second-language Literacy*” and “*From theory to practice*”. This course addresses the fundamental aspects of teaching reading and writing in a second language and will acquaint students with first- and second-language literacy research, practice, and reading assessment in elementary school settings. Students are expected to develop personal directions of inquiry for their professional growth and to be reflective about their development.

The last course is called *Cross-Cultural Communication and Classroom Ecology*; its key words are: “*Culture and language*”, “*Identity and Culture*”, and “*Cultural Aspect of Language Learning/Teaching*”. Designed to develop a foundation for the role of culture in instruction, this course explores the intersection of identity and culture, as well as the conceptual frameworks that provide meaning and understanding to people’s lived experiences as they relate to issues of power dynamics, race, ethnicity, and intercultural understanding. This course will engage students in a critical examination of theory and research on cultural aspects of the language learning/teaching process.

By looking at the course contents, the course objectives, and the goals for students, we can see how each course’s content fits into the conceptual framework of the Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program, and those of Teachers College at large.

In the next section of this article, the first author (HASE, Naoya) shares his reflections about what English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in Japan can learn from the underlying concepts of bilingual education in the United States, despite seemingly numerous and large differences between the two settings in terms of linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and societal diversities. The final part of this article will attempt to make it clear from the first author’s perspective as a Japanese teacher of

English that bilingual education in the United States and what it teaches us are very much relevant to the EFL teaching in Japan.

### **3. Application of the US Bilingual Education to Japanese EFL teaching: Perspectives from a Japanese teacher of English**

So far, we have looked at how bilingual education in the United States has progressed or regressed due to political and societal turbulences. Also, we looked at how future bilingual education teachers are trained by studying the conceptual frameworks of Teachers College, Columbia University, one of the leading graduate schools of education in the United States, and several courses offered at the institution's Bilingual/Bicultural Education Program. Now, we would like to ponder how the underlying concepts behind bilingual education in the United States can be applied to EFL teaching in Japan. There are three strands of relevancies that we will look at one by one below.

#### **3.1 Sociopolitical meaning of language and language teaching**

First, let us think about the sociopolitical meaning of language and language teaching. There are over 5,000 or 6,000 languages spoken on this planet, but no language is free from issues of power, whether it is economic, political, or military power. Language reflects the power of its speakers. It works the other way as well: by speaking a language associated with power, sometimes those who do not possess it as their native language can join the dominant group, or at least be possibly perceived that way by others. By the same token, there are languages that are not perceived as having much power, especially from the dominant group's perspectives, reflecting the limited power that the speakers of those minoritized languages have in society. When two languages having differential power status meet, it is always the language of the most powerless group that is expected to compromise. In the extreme case, these languages spoken by non-dominant groups get oppressed and sometimes placed in danger of extinction due to this power conflict; the same thing can be said about the language of minoritized people. Language minoritized people tend to get oppressed by language majority people, and it is precisely the mission of bilingual education in the United States to keep this from happening.

As we have seen, the fundamental concept of bilingual education in the United States is to pay respect to the languages and cultures that immigrant children bring to the classrooms and help them maintain those languages and cultures while learning the majority language. For bilingual education to be successful, language-sensitive and culture-sensitive pedagogy is indispensable.

This is a very important concept when we teach English in Japan as well. English

is currently perceived as a language of power due to its prestige, and also is considered a lingua franca in the international arena. This does not mean that everybody is happy with this situation (Pennycook, 1998); on the contrary, it is rather easy to imagine there are those who do not like English for various historical and political reasons. Of course, English is not the only language that generates mixed feelings among speakers. Any language, especially those associated with the group in power, can generate these feelings since dominant languages often times exist at the sacrifice of non-dominant languages.

When we teach and learn English, which is the *hyper-central language* spoken in almost any country and is now taught in most countries of the world (Cook & Singleton, 2014), both teachers and students should realize what it can mean to be a speaker of English to the people who are not in favor of or have mixed feelings about the current widespread popularity of the English language. Since it is used widely in the present world, it is still necessary for many of us to learn English but teaching and learning English should require careful consideration for the above-mentioned reasons. Teaching and learning English while being aware of its sociopolitical meaning discussed here can make a big difference to students.

### **3.2 Multilingualism and multiculturalism**

The concepts of multilingualism and multiculturalism are based on the idea that there are multiple languages and cultures in the world and that regardless of the size of the population who possess them, no language or culture is superior to others. All languages and cultures are equally valuable and important.

As mentioned in the previous sections, one important aspect of bilingual education in the United States is to respect the language and culture of language-minoritized children. While dominant languages and dominant cultures in the society are likely to influence and often oppress those of language-minoritized children, the idea that every language and culture is equally important is at the core of bilingual education in the United States.

This concept is very relevant to the EFL teaching situation in Japan as well, as we see the value that successful English learners should become intercultural diplomats (Corbett, 2003). While there is an argument that teaching English may be seen as a way to promote multiculturalism and contribute to intercultural understanding (MEXT, 2003), teaching English may also result in reinforcing the belief among its learners that English is superior to other languages and thus the most important language to learn (Kubota, 2015), which is the last thing we want to do if we are to cultivate multilingualism and multiculturalism in Japan. Only by adopting language- and culture-sensitive teaching materials and methods can English be a tool



to accomplish MEXT's goal; otherwise, the consequence of emphasizing the teaching of English can be disastrous in light of multilingualism and multiculturalism as Kubota warns. In this sense, teachers have a critical role to play. Starting in 2020, English will be taught as an academic subject in Japanese elementary schools (MEXT, 2017). This issue is of utmost importance now, since young learners such as elementary school children can be one of the most vulnerable groups among English learners due to the fact that they have not developed their critical perspectives yet.

### **3.3 Meaning of culture in language education**

Needless to say, language and culture are inseparable. In the context of language teaching, culture has been an integral part of language education since its beginning (Kumaravadivelu, 2008), so it is well worth considering what culture means and what role it plays in teaching and learning languages. Culture plays a critical role in bilingual education in the United States. Along with their language, the heritage culture of immigrant children is respected and cherished in bilingual classrooms. Understanding the culture of language- and culture-minority children is essential in bilingual education. Of course, we often talk about culture in other contexts such as EFL context in Japan, for example. We often talk about a teaching method that reflects Japanese culture to better teach Japanese language learners, for example. But how are we defining "culture" in such a case? According to Nieto (1999), culture is dynamic, always changing, learned in individuals' lives, and multi-faceted. It is never static or fixed. Defining culture as something more personal, Hidalgo (1993) refers to culture in the following way:

Each of us has been socialized in some culture, and often more than one culture. Our culture provides a lens through which we view the world and interpret our everyday experiences. Culture informs what we see and understand, as well as what we omit and misconstrue. Many components make up our view of the world: our ethnic and racial identification, the region of the country we come from, the type of neighborhood we live in, our socioeconomic background, our gender, the language(s) we speak, our disabilities, our past experiences, and our life-style. We need to think about the ways in which these parts of us define our perspectives (p.100).

When teaching English in Japan, we need to connect the language with the culture it comes from or represents, but at the same time, we need to pay attention to and take into account the culture of our students. We need to look at and understand the culture of their particular communities to really understand them as language

learners and make the learning process relevant and meaningful to them.

#### 4. Conclusion and Future Research

In this article, we have looked at bilingual education in the United States from its historical perspective, and the Bilingual/Bicultural Program at Teachers College at Columbia University, and to find three underlying concepts of US bilingual education that can be applied to the EFL teaching in Japan. As was mentioned earlier, the language teaching situations of the U.S. and Japan are significantly different, yet we believe that the essential meanings of language and language teaching based on the US bilingual education that we discussed are relevant to English teaching situation in Japan, especially since Japanese elementary schools are starting to teach English to young learners on a fuller scale than before in a few years. Its target age group coincides with that of bilingual education in the United States.

Most of what has been discussed in this paper was presented from the perspective of what teachers should keep in mind when they stand in front of their students in their classrooms. Our next step is to think about what specifically we as teachers can and should do in order to embody the concepts discussed and suggested here and convey the important messages of diversity, equity, and social justice to our students, such as revisiting our teaching materials. The efforts of Japanese scholars and teachers to evaluate and apply these principles in culturally relevant ways to Japan, and other principles that Japanese educators may discover, will definitely contribute insights to bilingual education scholarship in the United States and internationally.

#### Acknowledgments

Parts of this article were presented at the 2017 JASEC Research Forum held in October, 2018. The authors appreciate insightful comments provided by the audience which helped revise this article.

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