

## Societal Bilingualism and Second Language Education

\* Sasan Baleghizadeh

Shahid Beheshti University

### Abstract

*This paper aims to address a number of issues with respect to bilingualism and second language education. It starts with an emphasis on the fact that bilingualism is a common phenomenon in the world and that it can be studied both as an individual and a societal phenomenon. Next, it deals with reasons why some societies become bilingual. Afterwards, it introduces various bilingual education programs in North America followed by a number of guidelines for more effective teaching in these classes. Finally, it calls for incorporation of a course in sociolinguistics into the curriculum of teacher training programs.*

**Keywords:** Immersion Programs, Submersion Programs, Sheltered Programs

## دو زبانی اجتماعی و آموزش زبان دوم

ساسان بالغی‌زاده

استادیار گروه زبان و ادبیات انگلیسی، دانشگاه شهید بهشتی

### چکیده

هدف از نگارش این مقاله بررسی مباحثی در ارتباط با پدیده دو زبانی و آموزش زبان دوم می‌باشد. مقاله حاضر با تأکید بر این واقعیت که دو زبانی پدیده‌ای عادی در جهان بوده آغاز گشته و این موضوع را در سطح فردی و اجتماعی بررسی می‌کند. سپس به بررسی دلایل این که چرا برخی جوامع دو زبانه می‌شوند می‌پردازد. پس از آن برنامه‌های متداول آموزش دو زبانه شدن در آمریکای شمالی به همراه رهنمودهایی مؤثر در این زمینه را معرفی ساخته و در نهایت گنجاندن درس جامعه‌شناسی زبان در برنامه‌های رایج تربیت معلم را مورد تأکید قرار می‌دهد.

کلیدواژه‌ها: برنامه‌های آموزش دو زبانه، برنامه‌های آموزش دو زبانه برای مهاجرین، برنامه آموزش دو زبانه محافظت شده

\* Ph.D in TEFL from University of Tehran. Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences.

## 1. Introduction

The term bilingualism refers to the phenomenon of communication in two languages. A bilingual individual is someone who has the ability to communicate in two languages. This psychological state has been referred to as bilinguality (Hamers and Blanc 2000). Bilingualism is a widely accepted phenomenon in many parts of the world, to the extent that a monolingual person would be regarded as a misfit, i.e. someone who lacks the ability to interact freely with the speakers of other languages with whom regular contact is made in everyday aspects of life (Wardhaugh 1992). Bilingualism has often been studied both as an individual and as a societal phenomenon (Sridhar 1996). As an individual phenomenon, it covers issues such as how one acquires two or more languages in childhood or adulthood, how these languages are represented in mind (a unitary system or two systems), and how they are used for speaking, writing and comprehension. As a societal phenomenon, it is concerned with issues such as the status and roles of the languages in a given society, the attitudes of people toward these languages, determinants of language choice and the symbolic as well as practical uses of the languages in question.

## 2. Reasons for Bilingualism

Fasold (1984) discusses four major reasons for societal bilingualism: migration, imperialism, federation, and border areas. Below we will have a brief look at each.

**Migration.** Fasold (1984) divides migration into two types. In the first type a large group expands its territory by moving into neighboring areas and takes control over smaller sociocultural groups who are living there. Two things might occur as a result of this phenomenon. First, some of the native people succumb to the larger group and become linguistically assimilated. Second, some other people might maintain their own nationality and not yield to the larger group. The Catalonians in Spain and the Bretons in France are two examples of such incompletely assimilated nationalities. The second type of migration occurs when a small group of people from a certain ethnic background move into a territory already under the control of another nationality. Immigrants, for instance, arrive in a territory speaking their native languages. In this way, they add to the host nation's multilingualism. A good example of this phenomenon is the immigration of the nineteenth-century Europeans and Chinese to the United States.

**Imperialism.** Fasold refers to three subtypes of imperialism – colonization, annexation and economic imperialism – as important factors leading to multilingualism.

In colonization a small group of people from a controlling nationality move to a new area and take charge of it. In annexation a more powerful country seizes and takes control of one or more smaller countries (e.g. the absorption of the Baltic republics into the Soviet Union after the Second World War). In economic imperialism, a foreign language invades a country without the associated nationality ever taking political control of the country, partly because of the economic advantage associated with it. A good example of this phenomenon is the widespread use of English in Thailand, a country that has never been colonized by any English-speaking country. All the above-mentioned subtypes of imperialism introduce the language of the imperialist countries into other societies. Although very few people from the imperialist countries reside in the "colonized" countries, their language gains incredible importance. "In annexation and colonization, the imperialist language is likely to be used in government and education; in economic imperialism, the imperialist language becomes necessary for international commerce and diplomacy" (Ibid: 10).

**Federation.** As Fasold (1984) puts it, federation is the union of different ethnic groups or nationalities under the political control of one state. Federation is either voluntary or forced. The best example of voluntary federation is Switzerland, where there has been a union of states called cantons. Most of them joined the federation voluntarily. For this reason, Switzerland, has four official languages: German, French, Italian and Romansch.

In forced federation, there is a tendency to trace the effect European colonization in Africa and Asia. In this respect, many colonies brought together sociocultural and linguistic groups under a single administration that had never had a common government before. When these colonies gained independence, the new state remained a federation.

At times, it has been observed that a force-federated nationality attempted to secede, as did Biafra in Nigeria, Katanga from Zaire and Bangladesh from Pakistan. Only Bangladesh was successful in this regard. Thus it becomes a difficult task for the new nation to develop a society that is more a multiethnic nation than a multinational state. This necessity is, of course, mirrored in the language policy of that nation.

**Border areas.** This is the last factor which accounts for bilingualism in certain parts of the world. It goes without saying that every state must have well defined geographical boundaries so that it becomes clear which areas should be protected from enemy attacks, which areas should be covered by government services, etc. However, in many areas near the borders between countries, there are people who are citizens of one country, but members of a sociocultural group in another country. A good example of

this interesting phenomenon is the presence of French-speaking people in the northeastern of the United States. These people are ethnically closer to the citizens of Quebec in Canada. Therefore, they can play an important role in the spread of bilingualism in their region.

Now that it has become clear how societies become bilingual, it is time to turn our attention to a second major issue, i.e. bilingual education programs and second language teaching. However, before dealing with this topic it seems necessary to draw a distinction between the terms compound bilingualism, where the two languages fuse into a single signifying system, and coordinate bilingualism, where the two languages are kept apart as separate systems (Widdowson 2003). In other words, compound bilingualism refers to a situation in which an individual learns a second language after the rules of his/her native language have been acquired. Coordinate bilingualism, on the other hand, is concerned with a situation in which the two languages are acquired simultaneously. Thus, it is clear that compound bilingualism deals with language *teaching* issues and it is this type of bilingualism which will be the focal point of this paper.

### 3. The Audience for Bilingual Education Programs

Gaining proficiency in a second language is a desirable goal for most people. Therefore, any student can benefit from a bilingual approach to instruction as long as this approach meets his/her educational requirements. Seen in another light, bilingual education programs are not only developed for immigrants; rather there are particular approaches designed for monolingual students who seek to develop proficiency in another language (McGroarty 2001). Hence bilingual education programs are potentially useful for any student at any educational level, for in many parts of the world well-paid jobs and senior posts are usually offered to those who have a good command of a second or a third language, say English.

The following section will shed light on some of the well-known bilingual education programs widely practiced in North America.

### 4. Bilingual Education programs

These programs are usually divided into two types. The first type are programs which are specially designed for children and the second type are programs which are used for adults.

#### 4.1. Bilingual Programs for Children

These programs are of four types: transitional bilingual programs, maintenance bilingual programs, submersion programs and immersion programs.

**Transitional bilingual programs.** According to Siegel (2003), in these programs, the students' first language is the medium of instruction for the first few years of school. During this period, the second language is taught as a subject. Eventually, there is a shift to the second language as the medium of instruction. This may be abrupt or gradual. Transitional programs are found in both dominant and institutional second language situations - for example, with Spanish-speaking students in the USA and with Fijian- and Hindi-speaking students learning English in Fiji.

**Maintenance bilingual programs.** Like transitional bilingual programs, maintenance programs are designed to serve language-minority students. These programs aim to develop literacy skills in both the native language and the second language. In other words, such programs are intended to develop biliteracy. Maintenance programs, as the name suggests, maintain the use of children's native language all the way through the program. This, however, does not exclude the learning of academic literacy skills in the second language. Quite on the contrary, these programs are intended to use and develop two languages to the point of age-appropriate academic literacy skills (McGroarty 2001). Since these programs aim to develop biliteracy, they last much longer than transitional programs. In practice, they usually extend from grades K through 6.

**Submersion programs.** According to Richards et al. (1992), in these programs "the language of instruction is not the first language of some of the children, but *is* the first language of others" (Ibid: 362). This happens where immigrant children enter school and are taught in the language of the host country. As Brown (2001: 121) observes, students in these programs are "submerged" in regular content-area classes with no special foreign language instruction, assuming that they will "absorb" English as they focus on the subject matter. However, research has shown that in many instances students succeed neither in the second language nor in the content areas.

**Immersion programs.** First established in 1965 in a suburb of Montreal, Canada, immersion programs are now found across Canada and the United States, providing education in a variety of foreign languages (Snow 2001). Immersion programs are meant to immerse students in a language different from their native language. "The ultimate goal is to build strong academic literacy skills in that language and to give students access to subject matter taught entirely through the second language" (McGroarty 2001: 348). There are, for instance, schools in Canada for English-speaking children, where French is the medium of instruction. Now if these children are taught in French for the whole day it is called a *total immersion* program. However, if they are taught in French for only part of the day it is called a *partial immersion* program (Richards et al 1992). Finally it should be noted that

despite differences in program design, most immersion programs share the following four objectives:

- a) grade-appropriate levels of primary L<sub>1</sub> development,
- b) grade-appropriate levels of academic achievement,
- c) functional proficiency in the second / foreign language,
- d) an understanding of and appreciation for the culture of the target language group (Cloud et al 2000: 5).

#### 4.2. Bilingual Programs for Adults

There are two well-known types of these programs in North America: sheltered programs and vocational-technical programs.

**Sheltered programs.** According to Snow (2001), sheltered programs exist in a variety of secondary and postsecondary settings. In these programs there is a deliberate attempt to separate second language students from native speakers of the target language for the purpose of content instruction. The first sheltered program was established in a postsecondary setting at the University of Ottawa in 1982 in Canada. Based on this program, instead of taking a traditional second language course, students could opt to take a content course such as Introduction to Psychology conducted in a second language. All instruction was given in a second language by content faculty members who adjusted their instruction to an audience of second language students. At the beginning of each content lecture, there were some language instructors who, during some short sessions, provided students with useful expressions such as polite ways of interrupting the professor to seek clarification. Apart from these short meetings, there were no separate second language courses.

At the end of this sheltered psychology program, the language proficiency of the students was measured. Comparisons of these students with the students who had attended traditional ESL classes revealed that there was no significant difference in language proficiency gains of the two groups, despite the fact that sheltered students had not been *taught* the second language. "In addition to their gains in second language proficiency, the sheltered students demonstrated mastery of the content course material at the same levels as did comparison students enrolled in regular native-speaker sections of psychology" (Snow 2001: 308). Moreover, it was reported that these shelter students had greater self-confidence in using their second language skills as a result of active participation in sheltered classes. Since the implementation of this sheltered psychology course, hundreds of sheltered programs have been widely used in Canada and elsewhere to promote proficiency in a second language through content instruction (Echevarria and Graves 1998).

**Vocational-technical programs.** These programs for adults in the United States have been developed to provide short-term vocational training for some groups of immigrants who qualify for government support. Where there are large numbers of these learners who share the same native language and are illiterate in it, native language instruction may be included as a part of these programs to help the participants find a job as soon as possible. These bilingual programs that include native language literacy instruction for adults are particularly found in areas which represent the largest proportional settlement of recent immigrants. Some of these places are New York, California, Texas and Illinois (McGroarty 2001).

Now that several typical bilingual education programs have been introduced, it is time to mention a number of points which are worth taking into account while teaching in one of these courses.

### 5. Guidelines for Teachers in Bilingual Programs

It is hoped that the teachers who teach at any of the bilingual education programs discussed so far would find the following guidelines useful in their practice.

1. Previously, the poor performance of immigrant children in content courses in school was wrongly attributed to their low intelligence level (Hakuta 1986). People, however, have begun to realize that bilingualism is independent of intelligence and the poor performance of these immigrant students was due to the fact that they were not proficient enough in the second language. This is the reason why many of these students do not succeed in academic subjects. Thus, teachers should take this important matter into consideration while dealing with these pupils.
2. Teachers ought to admit the fact that although English is a language of undoubted importance, it is just one of the languages in a student's repertoire. The student's other language(s) are equally valuable and play an important role in the student's native community. Thus ignoring the existence of these languages by insisting too much on the exclusive use of English even at home (as many teachers advise immigrant parents to do) is harmful to the student's self-esteem and cultural identity (Sridhar 1996).
3. Language teachers who have been trained in monolingual, monocultural settings have often been unreasonably harsh to minority students who switch and mix languages (Sridhar 1996). However, it has been noted that code switching and code mixing are natural

phenomena in bilingual studies. Thus these teachers should be informed about these dimensions of bilingualism and hence adopt a more tolerant attitude to their teaching.

4. These last two points attest to the fact that students' first language should not be forgotten at all; rather it ought to be viewed as a useful resource which, at times, can help both the teacher and the students. In this respect, it is interesting to refer to Ernesto Macaro (1997) cited in Cook (2001: 155), who observed that language teachers in England widely use students' first language for five purposes: first to give instructions about activities; second to translate and check comprehension; third to give individual comments to students; fourth to give feedback to students, and fifth to maintain discipline. This thoughtful observation definitely provides teachers with a useful guideline: your students' first language is out there, so use it whenever circumstances require it.
5. Being an international language, English is a widely used language in both native and nonnative contexts. Among nonnative contexts, there are situation when, for example, an Italian businessperson is communicating with his or her French counterpart in English. Thus the stereotyped contexts in which an American doctor is talking to an American nurse no longer represents how English is used in today's world. This suggests that both teachers and materials writers should show sensitivity to how English is used and should be used in various cultural contexts throughout the world (Sridhar 1996; Cook 2001).

## 6. Conclusion

Now how can all these issues be introduced to practicing language teachers? As Sridhar (1996) rightly observes, the best place to discuss these issues is to incorporate them into the curriculum of teacher training programs. The majority of teacher training programs/books are abundant in courses such as language teaching methodology, language testing, syllabus design, etc. However, many of these programs lack an introductory chapter on sociolinguistic issues as important as bilingualism (see, for example, Doff 1988; Harmer 2001; Hubbard et al 1983; Ur 1996). Thus, it would be appropriate to introduce a required course in sociolinguistics, with a strong component on societal bilingualism, for teacher trainees. An awareness and an understanding of this phenomenon is crucial to any program in second language teaching and bilingual education.



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