

Multilingualism Alive

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Abstract—This study focuses on the implications of the ideologies behind monolingualism and multilingualism, drawing from past social issues and research analysis. The exploration of the issue endorses the English Plus proposal, supporting the continuation and cultivation of one’s heritage language(s). The study further investigates the social and cultural influences of monolingualism and multilingualism, highlighting the finding that multilingualism contributes to higher education and social expression while monolingualism depresses cultural identification. In evaluating multilingualism, the research focused on the predominant tutoring strategy employed by immigrant parents to bridge the language and cultural gap with their America-born children. The findings of this study confirm the advantages of a multilingualism society, leading to future investigations on identifying and evaluating the means to establishing multilingual environments.

Index Terms—multilingualism, monolingualism, English-only, English plus, Chinese

I. INTRODUCTION

In a broad sense, a person who speaks more than one language is regarded as “multilingual.” We use the term multilingualism to distinguish from monolingualism. While monolingualism refers to fluency in one language, multilingualism, including bilingualism, terms proficiency in two or more languages. Labeled as a “country of immigrants,” United States establishes its identity on multilingualism although the reality of the country suggests otherwise. The exploration of multilingualism dates back to the arrival of European immigrants to the North American continent. Inevitably, encounter with the natives raised the question of assimilation. Paralleling queries can be found today as Barack Obama focuses the national attention on immigration policies. What is hidden beneath the spotlight debates is the controversy surrounding monolingualism and multilingualism. Some minority languages, such as Chinese, are becoming less prominent in sections of society they were once commonly spoken. In Terre Haute, Chinese parents, taking notice that it is becoming increasingly difficult for their children to immerse in the Chinese language and culture, are sending their children to tutors to learn Chinese in hopes of overcoming the cultural barrier. By adopting a private tutoring strategy, Chinese parents undermine the English-only approach to keep multilingualism alive. This research paper includes three sections: the desirability of multilingualism, the drawbacks of English-only, and the adoption of a tutoring strategy to keep multilingualism alive.

II. THE DESIRABILITY OF MULTILINGUALISM

Characterizing the U.S. on an English-only basis contradicts the notion of our founders in adopting multilingualism to strengthen the foundation of society in this “polyglot” country. Rather than forcefully binding different ethnic groups together using a common tongue, a multi-cultural community draws its appeal from the coexistence of assorted speech, demonstrating a sort of social harmony sought after by minorities and majority alike (Crawford, 1994). To different ethnic groups, multilingualism offers different appeals with the common focus on self and cultural expression.

The United States of America is founded upon immigration. Dating back to European immigrants seeking religious toleration and adventurous explorations, languages such as English and Spanish first made their way into the Newfoundland. With time, whether forced or voluntary, more colors arrived to the nation, each bringing its own native languages and cultures. The blending of the immigrants’ languages with that of the Native Americans established the United States as a multilingual country, leading to the formation of an American identity based on a collection of the masses. The ideology carries itself into present day. Walking along the crowded streets of a moderately sized city, one can encounter Americans from different ethnic groups speaking in different languages. Immigrants enjoy the freedom of expressing themselves in their own languages and feel conventional in doing so. For example, in New York’s Chinatown, the immigrants still use Chinese to communicate. Pan (2002) points this out in Chinese in New York, “Although most U. S.-born Chinese inevitably move out, the Chinese population in New York communities, as a whole, still possesses a high level of language vitality to resist full shift to English” (p. 252). The advantages of speaking heritage language extend beyond the colloquial sense. In practicing one’s cultural tongue, young people or those brought up in areas less populated by their own ethnicities are able to identify themselves with a community, forming an awareness of their positions on a larger platform and connecting themselves with the art and history of their cultures (Edwards, 2004).

In addition to benefiting corresponding cultural groups, multilingualism is an indispensable resource to society as a whole. Speakers of different languages contribute unique accents and phonetics characteristic of their backgrounds, enriching the English language and culture. For example, the English language expanded by borrowing words from other languages such as “taco” from Spanish and “Yin and Yang” from Chinese. As a result, tourists from different countries feel at ease upon hearing and experiencing parts of their language in a foreign setting. Furthermore, businessmen are better accommodated because they are hosted by speakers using their native language in an alien country. The incorporation of multilingualism, therefore, offers an advantage over other countries with a monolingual system, attracting talented immigrants who may otherwise turn to different countries.

In America’s self-development, higher education in linguistics benefit from multilingual faculties and instructors. Immigrants’ native languages, therefore, should be protected and cultured as a valuable reservoir of knowledge. Instead of promoting conversion to English, it is in our nation’s favor to teach immigrants English and preserve their advantage of being fluent in another language. In doing so, America is effectively strengthening the language resources present in the country, cultivating a rich environment in which native English speakers are able to learn the tonal sounds of other languages (Stalker, 1994). By promoting multilingualism, we are increasing the language proficiencies of our native citizens, creating a healthy education cycle that can influence not only the global-mindedness of our citizens, but also their contributions to various professional fields. If the English-only policy is applied, when Americans need translators or interpreters of Spanish, French, Chinese, etc., they will have to develop the curriculum to train them from the beginning. When this occurs, Americans will miss the days of multilingualism. English-only may cause hesitation among upcoming immigrants from non-English speaking countries, redirecting them to immigrating to other countries, such as Canada and Australia. Thus, the damaging cycle of English-only feeds back into itself as professions requiring multilingual abilities will witness shortages of prospective employees.

Furthering the argument, multilingualism assists in learners’ intellectual development. People may ask whether learning one or two other languages puts more burdens on younger learners. However, there is no evidence supporting the claim that learning more than one language in early childhood hinders a child’s linguistic or cognitive development (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The majority of the research indicates that learning a language is opening a door to other cultures. Learners who have already mastered a language and are pursuing other languages know how to use cognitive strategies well. Lightbown and Spada (2006) point out:

There is no evidence that a child’s brain has a limited capacity for languages such that their knowledge of one language must shrink if their knowledge of the other grows. ... Children who have the opportunity to learn multiple languages from early childhood and to maintain them throughout their lives are fortunate indeed, and families that can offer this opportunity to their children should be encouraged to do so. (p. 4)

In learning multiple languages, people are becoming aware of the similarities and differences among languages, developing analytical techniques which allow them to assess the natures of different types of languages. In Terre Haute’s Chinese school, it was observed that students in contact with the Chinese language became increasingly curious toward the phonetics shared between Chinese and English. For example, students queried why Chinese characters’ meanings varied with differing inflections and emphasis. Many students questioned why mic, short for microphone, has a strikingly similar pronunciation in Chinese, only with a heavier emphasis and a brief separation in between the sounds. Interests extended to other English words with similar pronunciations in Chinese such as typhoon, coffee, and pizza. The tutor used this opportunity to illustrate that languages borrow words from each other and in some instances, keep the original pronunciation. These probing questions asked by multilingual learners demonstrate the mental calisthenics resulting from exposure to languages other than one’s native tongue.

With increased involvement with the studied language, the students explored cultural nuances as they queried if stereotypes often pressed upon the Asian community are accurate representations of the group. After comparing the education system of China and America, students developed curiosity towards the lives of Chinese teenagers, wanting to understand the routines of their Chinese counterparts. Many wished to experience a regular school day of a Chinese student and expressed interest in studying in a foreign country in the future if circumstances permit. Heightened anticipation in language and cultural exchanges among the students led to increased involvement in language education and amplified enthusiasm in acquiring new information. The expansion of students’ cultural interest and growth in initiatives to increase global awareness mark an appreciation of cultural differences and intensification of cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, these probing questions asked by multilingual learners demonstrate the mental calisthenics resulting from exposure to languages other than one’s native tongue.

On a larger scale, multilingualism preserves social harmony. Referring to the writings in the Declaration of Independence, which states that all men are created equal, Americans are inspired by using equality as the basis of American democracy. It is neither ethical nor American to deprive others of their rights in speaking their own languages. As we use language to think, to communicate, to learn, to teach, etc., language holds profound significance in the preservation and expression of cultures. To say yes to only one language would only be neglecting the language rights of those of a different tongue. Language is a powerful tool of human beings. According to O’ Neil (2013), we treasure this “symbolic system” and use it to trace our ancestor’s life and enjoy our cultural heritages. Language equality is a part of “cultural democracy.” We should respect human rights without neglecting the language right. Multilingualism in

the USA demonstrates the respect given to one's language right and thus reduces conflicts and struggles over the topic of expression, making the society more harmonious as a whole.

III. THE ENGLISH-ONLY MOVEMENT

The conflict between monolingualism and multilingualism has existed since an earlier time period of the USA. In the beginning, Native Americans maintained numerous languages and cultures. When the immigrants came, they brought languages and cultures of the Old World. This was the first period of American diversity, and multilingualism emerged as "a number of states passed legislation that approved bilingual education or native language education ..." (Grant, 2009, p. 34). However, this time period was by no means open to all, exemplified as later, African slaves who shared the same language were forbidden to gather together and Indians were forced to conform to the "civilized" ways of the whites, demonstrating a vastly different treatment in comparison to the toleration and acceptance granted to other groups of immigrants (Grant, 2009). The concept of assimilation became supported and popularized as the children of the Native Americans were forced to go to school where English was the language of instruction as English became the dominant language in society and the main teaching language in the public school system. The minority groups struggled to gain their own rights in education. The winning of a series of cases, *Brown v. Board of Education* and *Lau v. Nichols*, paved the way for nonnative English speakers as the native speakers are now entitled to support non-native speakers in learning (Grant, 2009). This "equal education" also enabled the non-native speakers to gain respect from the native speakers.

However, a consensus has not been reached on multilingualism. Actually, the situation is more controversial than we expected. Although the Federal government of the country does not designate a language as an official language, thirty states in America declared English as the state's official language. In 1981, Senator Hayakawa argued for adding the English Language Amendment (ELA) to the Constitution to make English the official language on the Federal level to maintain the unity of the country (Lang, 1995). The English First and U. S. English are supporters of the English-only movement, advocating for the idea that a multilingual environment distracts from national unity and loyalty. In order to prevent the possibility of other languages replacing the status of English, they advocate for limitations on bilingual education and bilingual ballots (Betancourt, 1994). The National Education Association (NEA) is one of the organizations that oppose the English-only movement. They listed the disadvantages from the English-only in 1988: ELA will further isolate the minority citizens from social, economic and political mainstream; it harms the international business and international communication; it allows the tight government control of media and will weaken the private sector. It will make language education more difficult (NEA, 1998). If added to the Constitution, the ELA would have made English the official US language. This amendment, however, was never passed by Senate or the House of Representatives.

Mitchell (2005) presents a case study conducted in Massachusetts that addressed a legislation change in 2002, "the U.S Congress passed legislation that transformed the Bilingual Education Act into the English Language Acquisition Act as part of the larger No Child Left Behind Act" (p. 254). This passage meant that the legislation is not in support the bilingual program anymore on the basis that English should be the only lawful language of instruction. The legislation made it difficult for the school and the principal to hire bilingual teachers to help Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. As a 68% majority voted for English only in Massachusetts in 2002, Mitchell (2005) states, "Sadly, as we enter the 21st century, our country harks back to an ideological perspective prevalent early in the 20th century" (p. 269).

As some scholars still distinguish "mainstream language" and "non-mainstream language," the English-only concept remains a sensitive term to immigrants and potential immigrants alike. The "melting-pot" ideology is lacking in its empirical basis. It fails to answer the question: Which is the mainstream culture that can assimilate the other cultures? English culture? Why not French culture or Spanish culture? Then debates are aroused. The "melting-pot" ideology encounters resistance in reality. For example, there is an Amish community in West Terre Haute that isolates itself from modern society to keep its own language and culture from being tainted by the ideas of English supremacy.

In 1985, the Spanish American League Against Discrimination (SALAD) defended the bilingual education and coined the term "English Plus" (Draper & Jimenez, 1994). Contrary to the ideas presented in English-only, English Plus advocates for English and more. Instead of eliminating the use of other languages, English Plus values the preservation of native language(s) and supports the idea of teaching and learning in one's native language in order to acquire English fluency. The English Plus coalition, "formed in 1988 through the efforts of the National Immigration, Refugee, and Citizen Form, an advocacy and civil rights group, and the Joint National Committee on Languages" (McGroarty, 1994, p. 113), argued on the basis of protection of First Amendment rights for all. The coalition took the platform that in supporting the English-only policies, minorities' rights to Freedom of Speech would be jeopardized. Furthermore, in advocating for a higher-level proficiency test in naturalization and other measures alike, immigrants are being deprived of fair access to government services and benefits enjoyed by native English speakers (Betancourt, 1994).

IV. ADOPTION OF A TUTORING STRATEGY TO KEEP MULTILINGUALISM ALIVE

Combs and Lynch (1990) says, “It is English Plus, not English-only, that holds the greatest promise for a unified society in which no one group – majority or minority – feels threatened” (p. 106). Dicker (2003) encourages the minority groups to take actions to gain more linguistic power:

Multilingualism calls for a vigorous and sustained effort to perpetuate ethnic sub-groups within society. At the same time, such groups need to advocate for themselves, for their socioeconomic advancement, and for acceptance as equals to mainstream Americans at all levels of participation in society. This involves advocating for greater acceptance of their language, for an adjustment in equal balance of power between English and the minority languages represented across the nation. (pp. 312-313)

The Chinese community is a minority group in the USA. The earlier Chinese immigrants worked in gold mines, restaurants, laundries etc., and now, well-educated immigrants and American-born Chinese have the opportunities to attain higher paid positions. As many Chinese parents realize that English is the mainstream language in economic, political and social aspects in America, they are committed to ensuring the English proficiency of their children. On the other hand, Chinese parents work to guide their children into Chinese communities and cultural activities in order to prevent the loss of Chinese heritage. In an environment where Chinese is often not offered at primary or secondary education institutions, Chinese communities or groups of Chinese parents make efforts to keep the Chinese language and culture alive. Edwards (2004) points out:

Lack of fluency [in Chinese] has an impact on many social situations. Children feel humiliated, for instance, when they can't relate to others of their own age on visits to the home country, or when they can't join in conversation with visitors. Many young people reject the [Chinese] language in adolescence but bitterly regret this decision as they grow older. (p. 82)

The influence of the Chinese language is rising in the USA due to the rapid social, economic and political development in China. Dicker (2003) writes that “recent efforts toward the modernization of China have heightened the sense of pride that Chinese Americans have in their culture and their desire to identify with it” (p. 75). However, the parents cannot get any help from public schools because most elementary and middle schools do not offer foreign language courses. They then decide to invite tutors to teach children the Chinese language. Private tutoring has a long history in Chinese education. In ancient Chinese dynasties, tutoring was the main practice in educating children. Although the tutoring time, one or two hours per week, is not enough to fully communicate the Chinese language and culture, the parents value the opportunity, regarding it as one of the only ways to keep multiculturalism alive.

In order to facilitate learning interests and introduce students to new conventions and phonetics, tutors used props such as playing cards lined with Chinese characters, picture flashcards connecting Chinese objects with more familiar American ones, and Chinese translations of popular American nursery rhymes. By consistently bridging established concepts with corresponding ideas of a different culture, the tutors carried the objective of creating a comfortable environment to demonstrate the interconnectedness of global cultures. Learning a new language, therefore, broke the boundary of dry repetition as many students have reported that the technique of presenting paralleling concepts contributes to their long-term memorizations of terms and objects, supplementing and enforcing the information presented to them through textbook literature and workbooks. The success of the tutoring strategy can also be attributed to some recognition on the students' part that learning a new language often presents work and business opportunities unavailable to those who practice monolingualism. In fact, tutors often cite practical applications of learning certain phrases or cultural practices. The art of drinking tea, for example, is commonly taught as a custom that if practiced correctly, could gain favor from coworkers and new friends alike.

The establishment of Terre Haute's Chinese school was a response to the local demands of promoting Chinese learning to the younger generation. As many parents have found and reported difficulties communicating with their American-born children, the inability of later generations to understand or connect with traditional sayings and cultural celebrations became a social crisis. One parent reported that she found it frustrating when her children refused to answer in Chinese, making it impossible for the visiting extended family to communicate without a “middle person.” These phenomena observed signal an impending crisis in which language is the first step to bridging the social and cultural gap between immigrated parents and American-born kids. Teaching linguistic classes at the Chinese school in Terre Haute, it was observed that as kids began to understand the tongue of their heritage, they expressed greater desires to try cultural activities associated with certain lessons. For example, groups of students were willing to perform at a local university's Chinese New Year Gala, demonstrating that through learning their language, they are also learning their roots.

V. CONCLUSION

The study has generated support for the continuation and preservation of multilingualism within United States. As monolingualism not only starves cultures of self-expression, but also increases the communication gap between immigrants and their second generation, English-only is not a viable option for the cultivation of native tongues. The above analysis of the necessity for multilingualism emphasizes the need of taking the English Plus approach focused on fostering the perpetuation of various cultures and languages.

Based on this study, one can conclude that multilingualism positively contributes both to the social and cultural composition of the United States. Contrary to the ideas of uniting by conforming to one, multilingualism demonstrates

the effectiveness of upholding and sustaining various languages in bridging generation gaps and attracting prospective immigrants. Future research will focus on exploring the means to achieving multilingualism in addition to the tutoring strategy and evaluating their efficiencies and ease of access.

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