



Transitional vs. Maintenance Bilingual Education: A Comparative Analysis of Academic, Social, and Identity Outcomes

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Abstract

The provision of bilingual education for linguistic minority students remains a contested domain within educational policy and applied linguistics. This comparative review examines two divergent programmatic models: Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE), conceptualized as a subtractive or "weak" form, and Maintenance Bilingual Education (MBE), conceptualized as an additive or "strong" form. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Cummins (1979), Baker (2001), and Garcia (2009), this paper synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature to evaluate both models across three domains: academic attainment, social integration, and identity formation. Two illustrative case studies are analyzed: Esperanza Middle School, California, representing TBE implementation, and King Fahd Academy, London, representing MBE implementation. The analysis indicates that the constrained duration of TBE, typically 2-3 years, is insufficient for the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), and is associated with attenuated academic outcomes and adverse psychosocial effects (Spener, 1988). Conversely, MBE, characterized by a minimum 6-year instructional trajectory, demonstrates correlations with enhanced academic achievement, biliteracy, and positive ethnolinguistic identity (Baker, 2001). It is contended that MBE constitutes a more pedagogically and socially efficacious model. Implications for language policy and teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: bilingual education, transitional, maintenance, CALP, linguistic minority, identity, academic achievement

1. Introduction

The increasing linguistic heterogeneity of student populations in the 21st century has necessitated a re-evaluation of instructional models for language minority learners. Within this context, bilingual education has emerged as a primary policy response. However, the term "bilingual education" encompasses a heterogeneous set of programs that differ substantially in philosophical orientation, structural design, and intended outcomes (Baker, 2001).

Of particular salience are Transitional Bilingual Education and Maintenance Bilingual Education. These models represent opposing ends of Baker's (2001) weak-strong continuum. TBE is predicated on an assimilationist paradigm, wherein the home language functions as a temporary scaffold to majority

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language acquisition. In contrast, MBE is predicated on an enrichment paradigm, wherein both languages are developed concurrently as educational resources.

Despite extensive research, consensus regarding the relative efficacy of these models remains elusive. This paper seeks to address this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of TBE and MBE. Specifically, it examines extant literature to determine the differential impact of each model on academic, social, and identity-related outcomes. It is hypothesized that the temporal and ideological dimensions of MBE render it superior for long-term student outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Bilingualism and Bilingual Education

The construct of bilingualism defies monolithic definition. Traditionally conceived as dual monolingualism, contemporary scholarship, particularly Garcia (2009), posits a "translanguaging" perspective. From this vantage, bilinguals possess a single linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically. Bilingual education, therefore, cannot be reduced to the mere allocation of instructional time across two languages. Brisk (1998) contends that in the U.S. context, it has frequently been operationalized as compensatory education for immigrant populations, thereby pathologizing linguistic diversity rather than recognizing it as an asset.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations: Cummins and Linguistic Interdependence

Central to this discussion is Cummins' (1979) theoretical model. The distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is pivotal. Cummins (1979) posited that while BICS can be acquired within 1-2 years, CALP requires 5-7 years.

Furthermore, the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis proposes that proficiency in L1 facilitates the acquisition of L2. Specifically, academic skills and conceptual knowledge acquired in L1 are transferable to L2. This framework provides a critical lens for evaluating program duration.

2.3 The Weak-Strong Typology

Baker's (2001) taxonomy remains seminal. "Weak" forms, including TBE, are characterized by assimilationist goals and frequently culminate in monolingualism. "Strong" forms, including MBE, are characterized by pluralist goals and aim for additive bilingualism and biliteracy. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) further argues that only strong forms can prevent linguistic genocide and support linguistic human rights.

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3. Transitional Bilingual Education: An Overview

3.1 Programmatic Characteristics

TBE is defined by its remedial objective: to utilize L1 temporarily until students demonstrate sufficient L2 proficiency to exit to mainstream instruction (Brisk, 1998). Baker (2001) delineates early-exit and late-exit variants, though both maintain an exit-oriented trajectory.

3.2 Empirical Evidence and Critique

The efficacy of TBE has been widely contested. Spener (1988) argues that the 2-3 year timeframe is epistemologically flawed, as it precedes the developmental threshold for CALP. Consequently, students are mainstreamed prior to acquiring the academic linguistic resources necessary for curricular success, potentially exacerbating achievement gaps. Moreover, Thomas and Collier's (1997) longitudinal data indicate that students in programs of less than 4 years consistently underperform relative to peers in dual-language or maintenance programs.

3.3 Case Study: Esperanza Middle School

As documented by Garcia (2009), Esperanza Middle School exemplifies TBE implementation. The program phases out Spanish instruction by Grade 5, culminating in full English immersion. While this model facilitates initial access, its structural design precludes the long-term development of academic Spanish, thereby limiting biliteracy outcomes.

4. Maintenance Bilingual Education: An Overview

4.1 Programmatic Characteristics

MBE is distinguished by its commitment to the sustained development of both L1 and L2 (Garcia, 2009). It rejects the deficit model and instead positions the home language as a cognitive and cultural resource. Baker (2001) differentiates between static and developmental maintenance, with the latter being associated with superior outcomes.

4.2 Empirical Evidence

A robust body of research supports MBE. Baker's (2001) meta-analysis of 20 studies found no evidence of academic detriment associated with L1 instruction. To the contrary, students in developmental maintenance programs frequently outperformed monolingual counterparts on standardized measures. Thomas and Collier (1997) similarly concluded that 90/10 dual language and maintenance programs produced the highest long-term academic achievement for language minority students.

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4.3 Case Study: King Fahd Academy

The King Fahd Academy in London illustrates MBE in a diasporic context (Garcia, 2009). By maintaining Arabic as a medium of instruction alongside the British National Curriculum, the academy fosters biliteracy and biculturalism. This model demonstrates the feasibility of MBE outside traditional nation-state minority contexts.

5. Comparative Discussion

5.1 Academic Domain

From an academic perspective, the disparity is attributable primarily to temporal factors. The insufficient duration of TBE precludes CALP development in either language, in accordance with Cummins (1979). MBE, by contrast, provides the requisite 6+ years for academic language to mature in both languages, thereby enabling cross-linguistic transfer.

5.2 Socio-affective Domain

TBE has been critiqued for its potential to engender subtractive bilingualism and identity conflict (Spener, 1988). The implicit message that L1 is disposable may contribute to diminished self-esteem and intergenerational communication breakdown. MBE, conversely, has been associated with positive ethnolinguistic vitality. Baker (2001) posits that institutional validation of L1 fosters positive self-concept and academic engagement. This aligns with social identity theory, which posits that group recognition enhances individual outcomes.

5.3 Policy and Ideological Implications

The persistence of TBE can be attributed to political expediency rather than pedagogical evidence. It accommodates monolingual ideologies while appearing responsive to diversity. MBE, however, requires a paradigmatic shift toward viewing bilingualism as a societal resource rather than a problem (Ruiz, 1984).

6. Methodological Considerations

This study employs a qualitative comparative literature review. Data were synthesized from peer-reviewed journals, monographs, and documented case studies published between 1979 and 2009. A limitation of this review is its reliance on North American and European contexts. Future research should examine MBE implementation in MENA and Asian contexts to enhance generalizability.

7. Conclusion

The extant literature suggests a clear delineation in outcomes between TBE and MBE. While TBE may address short-term linguistic needs, its structural constraints limit its capacity to foster academic excellence and positive identity formation. In contrast, MBE, by virtue of its extended duration and

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additive philosophy, aligns more closely with empirical evidence regarding second language acquisition and identity development. Therefore, it is recommended that educational policymakers prioritize the development and funding of maintenance and dual-language models. Future research should employ longitudinal, mixed-methods designs to further elucidate the long-term impacts of these models on both individual and societal levels.

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