The California Latino Population and the Need for Bilingual Education
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Abstract
The Latino population is one of the fastest-growing ethnic groups nationwide (U.S. Census Bureau 2000-2006). The state of California and the county of Los Angeles house the largest numbers of this population. Young people make up the majority of the Latino population, which means that they are still in the educational cycle (8th–12th grade). This young Latino population is currently challenged by English-only academic systems that threaten their acculturation and educational attainment processes. Using a meta-analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data and existing literature, the present research argues for the urgent need for the implementation of bilingual education programs in California. As the fastest-growing population, Latinos need academic success through educational attainment, health care and political access, and assistance in overcoming their fears of acculturation and assimilation so that in the future, when this population becomes the majority, they will be an educated and competent population as a whole.

In terms of legislation dealing with immigrants, language has always been at the root of the most pressing cultural and social topics. In the past, the United States tended to present its arguments in a manner that benefited the least diverse populations in an attempt to reach whatever desired outcome was at hand. There is a general perception among minorities that the United States is xenophobic regarding languages other than English. However, it would be fair to say that Americans have learned and grown from this perception. Focusing explicitly on the language needs in education for California’s Latino population while providing a historical overview, this study asks: Is bilingual education needed in California, and are there any benefits?

Language is now, in the 21st century, at the forefront of many cultural discussions as well as legislation process. More specifically, at the forefront of these discussions and legislative processes are both bilingual and general educational issues. These issues continue to be problematic for the nation at a time of continued growth in the immigrant population, a population that continues to grow even during the present economic crisis. Our multilingual language acquisition process as a nation has been somewhat slow. The presence of multiple layers of required legislation and the interference of special interest groups has made the process of incorporating more than one
language into the framework of the U.S. a very slow process. Most educators, researchers and immigrants themselves seem optimistic about the future of the nation's language evolution. Part of this optimism relies on the analysis of language development timeline, shown in Diagram 1 (Mora 2005) and the role that language has served over the centuries in U.S. society.

The most current evidence of the evolutionary process of language is found in the current president of the United States, Barack Hussein Obama. President Obama is an African American whose father was born in Africa. President Obama’s father had to learn English as a second language to thrive and ultimately master it to succeed in the U.S. colleges he attended. With a new African American president, most of America is coming together on an emotional, economic and spiritual level. However, that is not to say that the U.S. does not have quite a bit of ground to cover because there is a lot of work to do around issues that urgently need to be addressed, such as education, immigration, health care reform, and language. Language and education are at the forefront of all of these issues and are the focus of the present study.

In the past 12,000 years, there have been over 2,000 dialects spoken in the Americas, none of which were competing to be the “mother default” language because all people wanted to do was communicate (Krashen 1996, 52-59). However, the present is quite a different story. As shown in Diagram 1, from the 5th through 12th centuries in Europe, vernacular languages had their roots in the western Germanic languages and have since evolved into what is now known as English, enabling English to become the mother default language of many nations. According to history (Zentella 1988, 158-165), this shift happened during the 15th through 18th centuries when the British Empire conquered dynasties in other countries and regions with the goal of expanding its empire. As a result, the British Empire became a superpower. The second phase in the development of English as a hegemonic language took place in the 19th century when the United States established its independence from Britain. As an independent country, the United States emerged as the superpower of our times. These are the two main reasons why English is the dominant language in the United States. Because of this ascendancy, the United States created what some perceive as a linguistically xenophobic society.

As shown in Diagram 1, some of this linguistic imposition first became apparent when, in 1780, John Adams suggested that English be the official language of the United States. At the time, less than 3% of the population spoke English and the majority spoke either German or French.
The 1890 census indicated that only 3.6% of the population spoke English. Linguistically, American society was characterized by early and progressive discrimination practices against Northern Europeans (Scandinavians and some Germans) followed by Asians and, lastly, Spanish speakers. Northern Europeans weathered this storm for two generations and eventually

Diagram 1: Language Timeline.

The 1890 census indicated that only 3.6% of the population spoke English. Linguistically, American society was characterized by early and progressive discrimination practices against Northern Europeans (Scandinavians and some Germans) followed by Asians and, lastly, Spanish speakers. Northern Europeans weathered this storm for two generations and eventually
vindicated themselves by becoming the ruling class of America. Asians evolved into what some social scientists have called “model citizens,” (Rios 2007-2008) by assimilating and incorporating themselves into American business, becoming very successful as a group. This process also took Asians about two generations. Latinos (by which the author refers to Spanish speakers from at least 21 Spanish-speaking countries) on the other hand, are a group that has taken longer to assimilate, let alone acculturate. As a group, Latinos have not maximized their access to resources nor have they taken advantage of all resources available to them as a group. As such, Latinos are expected to take three to four generations to experience the assimilation benefits of their non-Latino counterparts (Baker 2006).

To experience these benefits, Latinos will need to overcome their fear of acculturating and embrace the nation in which they have chosen to live. Language is at the root of this process because without being able to communicate orally and in writing in their adopted country, change and progress cannot happen. Latinos know that they account for over 14.8% of the total population in the United States and also acknowledge that they are the fastest-growing minority group. According to the 2006 U.S. Census Bureau report, the general population in the United States is growing at a rate of 6.1%, whereas the Latino population is growing at a rate of 24.1%. The Latino community is immensely diverse within itself. Although Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (Zentella 1992) have been the hegemonic groups for decades, this too is changing.

The literature on bilingualism shows consensus that there needs to be a starting point and that without proper leadership the Latino population will not progress as rapidly as its growth demands. Without the proper leadership and guidance, the Latino population will continue to flounder. Surprisingly enough, our nation’s foremost leader, President Obama, has acknowledged the need for such cohesiveness among Latinos through the appointment of Latinos/Latinas into his cabinet. Both appointees, Hilda Solis and Sonia Sotomayor, provide leadership in areas where Latinos have urgent issues that need to be addressed (labor and legal). Current Latino leadership has started getting attention through legislative appointments such as Hilda Solis, the new Secretary of Labor, and the appointment of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. These accomplishments are major and visible strides within a sub-population that is currently dominating many of the labor markets as well as leading the population growth of the world’s most powerful nation, the United States of America. Globalization has made it possible for Latinos to corner certain labor markets such as: food processing, canneries, agriculture, and construction, just to name a few (Krashen 1996, 33-35). But
along with those noted achievers and achievements, Latinos need to factor in other mentors or models in the fields of science and education, of which there are too few.

**Methods**

The methodology selected for this research question is a quantitative, qualitative narrative with a meta-analysis approach. Due to the nature of the query, this quantitative method was essential to show that the reported statistics support the need for greater bilingual education in a growing California Latino population (Krashen 1996, 95-100). The findings indicate the alarmingly low rate of growth, educational attainment and the income levels among Latinos. Using qualitative methodologies alone would have been futile for supporting this proposal in that it would not have been possible to ethically prove the need, and because the findings would have been subjective to whoever was polled. In addition, the ethnicity of who was polled would have swayed the findings. Upon researching what method to use, the researcher read many journals, articles, and books.

**Literature Review**

Given the current studies and reviews of our time, Jay P. Greene’s article, *A Meta-Analysis Review of Christine Rossell and Keith Baker’s Research Study on the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education* (1996), indicated that taking such a biased poll would have proven to be very imprecise and, possibly, unethical. In addition, the research and writings by Colin Baker, in *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, further support Greene’s findings. Both Greene (17) and Baker’s (228-267) research concluded that bilingual education works. Because bilingual education is operative, it is therefore proposed by this author that it is imperative that a working model is made accessible to the large, young, and growing California Latino population to ensure that they get the best possible education.

Actual numbers, graphs, and statistics (2006 U.S. Census Bureau) validate the population growth rate and trends of California’s Latino population. In support of the stacked methodology, this researcher went a step further by incorporating the information provided by two credible and unbiased sources: the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Latino Health Alliance. The State of California contracts with the Latino Health Alliance and funds its research related to issues within the Latino population.

Greene’s purpose for conducting his meta-analysis study was to validate that Rossell and Baker’s research on 75 methodological studies would prove
to be acceptable (1996). For the purpose of this study, Greene opted for a process called meta-analysis. Meta-analysis is the process by which study or research findings are validated through an additional process of researching and dissecting the study so that its validity can be proven. Greene’s credibility is established by his serving as director of languages at the University of Arkansas, his research on bilingual education (focusing on bilingual education versus immersion programs), and the fact that the 75 studies were used in four major supreme court case rulings that ruled in favor of bilingual education (2002, 2005, 2008, and 2009). Meta-analysis is best described by Greene as “a statistical technique most commonly used with quantitative research” (1996). What this means in layman’s terms is that he looked at 75 pertinent studies and further validated them as acceptable or unacceptable research studies on bilingual education. Greene selected the following research questions: (1) Should diverse populations have bilingual education? and (2) Are there any benefits? These questions are crucial for this author’s present research because they establish the basis of the research question of this present study: Is bilingual education needed in California and are there any benefits? Similar to the methods used in the present research, Greene felt it was important to provide the historical facts related to his subject so that the effectiveness and relevance of such a study could be determined. Some examples of Greene’s presentation of such facts included his discussion of how Proposition 227 in California sought “to eliminate the use of native language in the instruction of children with limited English proficiency (LEP)” and that, ultimately, Proposition 227 passed. He further states that when Proposition 227 passed, the state government no longer provided the funding for this type of education. Interestingly enough, the federal government stepped in and said that, not only were these programs needed, but the removal of such programs would violate the Fourteenth Amendment rights of this diverse population. Rossell and Baker’s research (1996) refuted Proposition 227 and argued that children learn English best when they are taught in English. Greene is quick to refute this argument by presenting the research and analysis he conducted on the research by Kenji Hakuta for Greene (1998). Hakuta claimed “native language approaches are indeed beneficial for children learning English.” Greene makes a relevant observation about the benefits of Hakuta’s argument and how the media exemplified Hakuta’s view: If Hakuta was really conducting a meta-analysis, he should have also seen that the media was controlling the people’s vote (1998). We saw the same results with the passing of Proposition 227. The media helped pass this proposition and swayed the electorate vote (Mora and Krashen 1982; Zentella 1997). According to Greene, “The fact that research upon research indicated the opposite of Proposition 227 only
brought to light how the media and electorate in California, as a rule, do not pay any attention to research” (17). California spent millions of dollars on research yet the voting constituency failed to acknowledge the findings. Most importantly, the final outcome, according to Greene’s arguments, is what is most essential for examination. Though Greene concedes that “interpretations of research findings can be ambiguous or inconsistent” (15), such is not the case with Rossell and Baker’s research. What is relevant in this review is that Greene opted to conduct a meta-analysis of Rossell and Baker’s research (1996), because he states that a more accurate review is achieved through a “systematic and statistical aggregation of research findings and in the process it will support diametrically opposite conclusions” (3). The result is that upon conducting this review, Greene discovered that only 11 out of the 75 methodological studies researched by Rossell and Baker proved to be acceptable under the established criteria (1996). The reason for this finding is that Rossell failed to research the validity of all 75 studies used. Instead, the researcher counted updated versions of an included study as a separate study. Secondly, when Rossell and Baker were unable to locate studies relevant to their research, they arbitrarily replaced them with imprecise studies. Greene was astounded at such a violation of ethics in a research study of this category. To argue his conclusion and findings of this review further, Greene indicated that the 11 methodological studies found to be acceptable were actually in favor of bilingual education (1996, 17-18). The studies also showed that students scored higher with immersion programs. Nonetheless, bilingual education did contribute to the increase in their test scores versus those of students without a bilingual education. An immediate or important lesson one may learn from this finding is that research on bilingualism may be limited because the sub-population is as dynamic as the language they speak. Greene’s meta-analysis was essential for the research question presented in the present study because it validated the importance of how such research is conducted. In addition, through the literature review of Greene’s meta-analysis, the importance of Colin Baker’s research and writings were supported. Baker has written numerous books on language and bilingual education. His research and writings on these studies make him Greene’s counterpart of the 21st century. Both scholars are critical-minded, experienced and daring enough to even refute and investigate their own work. Baker is best known for his book, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, now in its fourth edition. This book covers all the latest research studies and arguments regarding bilingual education. Baker, like Greene, qualifies why quantitative methods are best served when proving the need and benefits of bilingual education. Having read all of Baker’s books and
perused his complete encyclopedia on bilingual education, this author can report that Baker's research is substantiated with detailed findings.

**FINDINGS**

The passage of Proposition 227, as discussed previously, was one example of how controversial and polemical the topic of bilingual education is in California. The Proposition 227 controversy has been documented in many studies conducted by the Latino Health Alliance (2005), U.S. Census Bureau (2000-2006) and the Hispanic Center for Change (2002, 2005). These organizations have specifically targeted this diverse and growing population of Latinos so that the populace can make effective decisions when voting on behalf of this same population.

The statistics shown in Diagram 2 make a statement about why bilingual education is fundamental for creating a better California. Secondly, these statistics provide the platform for further research and future legislative initiatives. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau and the California Statistical Abstract from 1999, Latinos made up 19% of the population in 1980; whereas African Americans were at 8%, Asians at 5%, whites at 67% and Native Americans at 1%. Compare these numbers to those from the 2006 Census where the percentages clearly show the tremendous growth of Latinos in California: Latinos made up 32% of the population, whereas the African American population decreased to 7%, the Asian population increased to 13%, the white population decreased to 77%, and the Native Americans population remained at 1%.

Diagram 2. Age Distribution by Sex and Hispanic Origin, 2002. **Note:** Each bar represents the percent of the Hispanic (non-Hispanic White) population who were within the specified age group and of the specified sex. **Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 2002, PGP-5.

The U.S. Census Bureau has predicted that the 2010 census will further indicate that the growing Latino population will be above 40%. California
boasts the highest birth rate for Latinos, as compared to any other minority group. For every one child classified as “non-Hispanic white” there are thirteen Latino babies born. According to the 2000 and 2006 U.S. Census Bureau reports, the majority of these Latino babies were born in the United States, while their parents were foreign-born. The data also reveals a very important fact: There is a young Latino population. Specifically: 45% are 0-17 years of age, 51% are 18-64 years of age, and 4% are 65 and older.

As a diverse group this might seem encouraging, but not when one sees the numbers in terms of their educational backgrounds. Diagram 3 shows that over 50% of the Latino population does not have a high school education. Mexicans are at the top of this statistic with 70%. As a result, over half of the Mexican immigrants in the U.S. do not speak English; much less understand the language (Diagram 4).


![Diagram 4. Mexican Immigrants’ Ability to Speak English Well. Source: Latino Health Alliance (2005)](image)
Lindholm (1991) conducted research on theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence for academic achievement in two languages. The researcher proved that educational attainment is not only achieved, but exceeds academic scoring expectations when the mother language is spoken (Spanish) and taught together with the default language (English).

The difficulty of language barriers is that they create other forms of barriers between these cultures, which these sub-populations are sometimes unwilling to acknowledge. This issue becomes more apparent in the financial arena. Consider the following statistics. Comparing the earnings of Latinos and their white counterparts shows that Latinos earn .54 cents in comparison to $1 earned by their white counterparts. This disparity is primarily due to Latinos having not finished their high school education (whether in their native country or in the United States) and their inability to speak and understand English well. This problem is apparent when one considers that, due to the lack of educational attainment, many Latino families are experiencing financial difficulties (U.S. Census Bureau 2000, 2006 reports).

Krashen (1996) also argues that Latinos’ financial difficulties have followed them to the United States from their mother countries because this population came from a financially disadvantaged background (37). Furthermore, the 2006 U.S. Census Bureau report indicates that non-Hispanic immigrants come from more affluent households than their Latino counterparts (Diagram 5). According to the 2006 U.S. Census Bureau report and the 2005 Latino Health Alliance report: one of every five Latinos in California was poor and one of every three children of these immigrants lived in a poor household.

Greater percentages of Latinos are poorer than any other ethnic group in California, according to these reports. The financial crisis in the Latino population crosses over to health care as well. Latinos have limited access to health care due to financial difficulties. According to the 2005 Latino Health Alliance report:

- More than one in four Latinos ages 0-64 in California are uninsured (28% of Latinos compared to 9% of whites).
- The high uninsured rate is largely due to the very low rate of health insurance provided by their employers (43% for Latinos compared with 76% for whites).
- Almost two-thirds of uninsured Latino children (ages 0-17) are eligible for one of California’s two public health insurance programs: Medi-Cal or Healthy Families.
- Community and hospital clinics are the usual sources of health care for half of Latino children in households below the 100% family poverty level.
- Less than 4% of physicians in California are Latino and only 5% of the state’s medical residents were Latino in 2000.

While some might blame these financial and health care issues on the Latino population itself, one might instead ask: Is this population any different from the populations (from the same countries) that are being helped outside the United States? Does the California Latino population not contribute more than those other populations outside the United States? One might argue that due to the lack of education or the conscious choice to be here legally or illegally, educated or not, it is not anyone’s issue except the people who have made that choice.

The reality is that the Latino population has been contributing to the U.S. economy as a result of the socio-economic climates in the Latino countries. As a result, Latinos contribute more than $4 billion dollars to the economy of Mexico through the transfer and sending of monies to family members from the U.S. to Mexico, not to mention the additional $25 billion dollars to the other 20 Latino countries, according to a 2007 NAFTA report. Diagrams 6 and 7 show the occupations in which Latin men and women work in the United States. The question that stands out is: Why not help the fastest-growing population that is also contributing in the labor and world trade markets? (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 2008 report; U.S. Dept. of Labor 2009 report).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the existing research—such as Greene (1996), Baker (2006), the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), Zentella (2004), and others—the wider population needs to stop discriminating linguistically and, experts in bilingualism need to acknowledge the research available that shows the benefits of bilingual education. Additional research could reveal more benefits for offering bilingual education, including:

- Acknowledging the challenges that California’s Latinos face so that the genocide of a culture and language stops
- Promoting diversity by educating the minority populations
- Advancing cultural and educational competency
- Providing health care and political access

This society could benefit as a whole, not just as one population. These benefits should offset the challenges that Latinos face everyday. Latinos are critical, as a population, for the state of California as they affect all aspects of the state’s survival. These effects extend to labor, education, health as well as the government itself.

It is important for one to take into consideration four specific characteristics of this population, which are the driving force behind the need for bilingual education (U.S. Census Bureau 2000-2006):

1. Most Latino children are born in the U.S., but most Latino adults who live in the U.S. were born abroad.
2. Latinos are a young population.
3. Their educational attainment level is low.
4. Their English language proficiency is low.

Future research must also address important policy issues that will make this sector of the population more educated and better equipped in the labor market. Bilingual education is at the core of many important issues. It has been proven that healthy children are most likely to succeed in schools (Latino Health Alliance 2005). Promoting easily accessible health care, family support, the reduction of poverty, and improving educational attainment can all be achieved by breaking down language barriers with bilingual education. Bilingual education also affects immigration, anchor babies (U.S. born children born to undocumented immigrants), driver license permits, and the issuance of social security cards. Access to these items and everyday issues may seem trivial to some, but, according to Zentella (1997), these everyday privileges that many U.S. citizens may take for granted, when not available, create an even greater barrier for Latinos to attain individual success. It is very clear
that our current president understands this urgent topic. President Obama was recently quoted as saying that the issue of language and immigration had jumped to one of his top five agenda items (2009).

**Conclusion**

This author therefore proposes that by standing up and addressing important and urgent topics like bilingual education, Latinos will open the gateway for other populations to benefit from their efforts. By having their linguistic situation evaluated objectively, Latinos will assist the United States in continuing to be competitive worldwide and educated as a diverse nation. These efforts will create a diverse, motivated, and united superpower that is educated, competitive, and respected worldwide. As such, the largest growing sub-population in the United States, Latinos, will become an integral part of American society, like other immigrant groups that have gone through the same experience.
REFERENCES


