Perspective on Schools and Language

Today’s America Needs Many Tongues

Abroad, multilingualism is the norm. But our value system degrades anything other than ‘standard’ English.

By HALFORD H. FAIRCHILD

Language is the medium of human exchange. Language—written and spoken—delimits our species.

But language is also heavily politicized and a vehicle for ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism. Language too often serves as a barrier to intercultural awareness and understanding.

Nowhere is this more important than in the United States, a “salad bowl” of nationalities, ethnicities and languages. Within our borders are individuals who represent hundreds of cultures, languages and dialects.

Despite this diversity, bilingual education is given short shrift in our public and private schools, and “linguistic minority” children are confronted with the bewildering task of acquiring the Three R’s in a language that they can scarcely understand. Our sink-or-swim teaching methods deny these children an equal educational opportunity, setting them back for the rest of their lives.

In the context of tight budgetary reality, bilingual education often finds itself last in line. In Los Angeles, several thousand teaching aids—most of them bilingual—are striking for modest working conditions: four-hour minimum work days, sick pay and health benefits.

Our colleges are poorly equipped to train teachers in bilingual education—and most of the training that is available emphasizes the teaching of English to non-English speakers. This “subtractive bilingualism” is consistent with a value system that degrades languages and dialects other than “standard” English.

Demographic projections point to the increasing heterogeneity of the U.S. population into the 21st Century. But our educational system appears neither willing nor able to provide relevant learning experiences for the increasingly diverse student bodies that constitute our schools.

Bilingual education, in the rest of the world, is the norm; not an odious program fraught with political bickering and divisiveness. In most of the world today, the majority of populations are necessarily bilingual or multilingual.

Educational systems in other countries take linguistic diversity into explicit account, where the expectation is that the well-educated person is conversant in two or more languages.

Schools in large metropolitan areas are characterized by linguistic diversity among pupils. These students can act as linguistic role models for native English speakers. Instead, they are segregated in classrooms that retard their academic development in the interest of making them fluent speakers of English. The sad reality is that they lose their native language proficiency while falling behind their English-speaking counterparts in basic academic skills.

Our research indicates that bilingualism is a cognitive asset. Instead of a mark of confusion, bilingualism affords the individual with enhanced learning flexibility and a more empathic awareness and understanding of different cultures and world views.

Foreign-language education in the United States typically treats the study of another language as an object of inquiry, rather than as a tool for communication and intercultural understanding. The result is that although the average American college graduate has been exposed to several years of foreign-language instruction, the majority of college graduates cannot engage in a meaningful conversation in other than English for more than a few minutes.

We may learn to conjugate verbs, but we don’t learn how to use those verbs in meaningful communication.

International business and commerce require a sensitivity to different cultures and language systems. This requires the development of innovative language-education programs that capitalize on the rich language resources represented in the diversity of students in our schools. It requires a desire and a willingness for most of us to acquire the ability to read, write, speak and understand a language other than English. It requires the recognition that the influx of immigrants into the United States affords an opportunity, not a challenge.

Bilingual education, and language education in general, reveal fundamental concerns with the quality of American education.

By trying to resolve the issues involved in language education, we also pursue democracy in public education; the enhancement of the intellectual and social development of our populations; sensitivity to other peoples of the world, and competitiveness in an increasingly international arena of business, science, politics and culture.

Halford H. Fairchild is a social psychologist in Los Angeles; with Amado Padilla of Stanford and Concepción Valadez of UCLA, he has jointly compiled and edited two books on the role of language in modern society: "Bilingual Education: Issues and Strategies" and "Foreign Language Education: Issues and Strategies" (Sage Publications).