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Bilingualism in the Classroom: Exploring Teachers' Beliefs, Attitudes, and Practices

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Abstract

This research attempts to study the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of teachers in the US classroom regarding bilingualism, and it will try to understand how those same attitudes and practices may assist or, on the other hand, block the way toward the implementation of effective educational bilingual programs. Given this strong growth in the number of bilingual-background students, teachers need clear orientation regarding the character and specifics of their place in the establishment of a supportive environment for bilingualism. Qualitative design—a set of semi-structured interviews of proficient teachers of bilingual students—comprises a methodological approach that will be used in this study. The backgrounds of teachers and their experiences are found to strongly influence the attitudes of teachers towards bilingualism, which in turn has an influence over their practices in the classroom. Bilingual teachers or teachers having experience with bilingual students hold pro-attitudinal views toward bilingualism, and in relation to that, they also tend to implement programs on bilingual education. On the other hand, educators with fewer linguistic skills or those who have monocultural attitudes will more often manifest negative attitudes and hence may be the ones that influence the adoption of such programs in a negative way. These results argue in favour of positive attitudes toward bilingualism being fostered through focused professional development of teachers and supported by policies that will allow an inclusive and supportive environment for students participating in a bilingual program.



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Abstract

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Keywords: language diversity, bilingual students, educational policies, teacher perspectives, classroom environment

Introduction

Bilingualism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has received increasing attention in the field of education. In the ambit of education, bilingualism is defined as a significant concept in such an approach that the students, through which learning is provided, can speak and understand well in two different languages. For example, in the United States, over the last 20 years, the number of students reporting their home language to be one of the other than English languages doubled (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The increase in the number of bilingual students meant an evolution in educational policies, where most schools of today resort to bilingual education programs in order to meet their required student criteria. The effectiveness of such programs, however, lies more in the hands of a teacher—his beliefs, attitudes, and classroom practices as to bilingualism. Thus, the paper would seek to engage in the discussion of teachers' beliefs and attitudes, as well as practices regarding bilingualism in the classroom. This essay shall answer the following research questions through detailed literature review and qualitative research: What are the teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding classroom bilingualism, and how do the very beliefs and

attitudes manifest in practice? What are the benefits and challenges of bilingualism in the classroom from teachers' perspectives?

The phenomenon of bilingualism is very multidimensional and starts to look very complicated actually, considering the fact that the student population is increasingly becoming diverse. Moreover, concomitant with the increasing number of bilingual students, many schools have adopted programs of bilingual education to serve their interests. However, the success of these programs may largely depend on the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of teachers towards bilingualism in the classroom. In this line, the research paper aims to find out teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices towards bilingualism in the classroom, hence assessing the role of teachers' beliefs and practices in designing effective programs for bilingual education.

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Research Questions

Q1: What are teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards bilingualism in the classroom?

Q2: How do these beliefs and attitudes affect their practices?

Q3: What are the benefits and challenges of bilingualism in the classroom from teachers' perspectives?

To answer these research questions, a comprehensive literature review and qualitative research methodology was used. The literature review will provide an overview of the existing research on teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices towards bilingualism in the classroom. The qualitative research will involve semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of teachers who have experience teaching bilingual students in public schools in the United States. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data collected from the interviews will be analysed using a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and themes in the data. The findings was used to answer the research questions and provide recommendations for future research and practical implications for teachers, policymakers, and educators to promote a more positive attitude towards bilingualism in the classroom and to better support bilingual students.

Literature Review

In the last few decades, increasing interest has been evidenced in the field of bilingual education in relation to the development of classrooms as pluralistic settings where students can draw and use their complete linguistic repertoire. The central role of teachers both in the implementation and interpretation of language policy, therefore, involves them, by its nature, in the formation of language policy that is taking place at the classroom level. The far-reaching effects of language ideologies on the implementation and construction of policy have been vastly documented, putting explicit emphasis on the complexities and multiplicity of ideological angles in bilingual education. This underscores the formidable task it is to change well-entrenched language ideologies and set them toward the direction of more enriching dual language bilingual education (DLBE) paradigms. The paper then delves into the language ideology of two third-grade bilingual teachers, who have been given the assignment to implement the DLBE program in the same district but in different schools. It seeks to unmask how these educators' language ideologies inform their practices in a way that positions them within a larger ideological landscape on the basis of what they express and practice.

This study reflects based on language ecology, with models of language planning and policy (LPP) frameworks, that reinterpretation and renegotiation are the core educators' language ideologies in participation with language policy. According to research, these are ideologies that one should get to understand, while their intentions are to ensure that home language practices of students are seen as resources and not hurdles. Furthermore, the paper canvasses for a reconceptualization of language and bilingualism away from dual monolingualism and hence proposes translanguaging as a more appropriate term for bilinguals' language practices. This view claims to undermine the traditional and accepted

demarcation of languages in DLBE models and responds to the methodological implications that would ensue from naming the languages in educational settings.

Finally, the paper seeks to look into the nexus that exists between language ideology and identity, drawing much onto discursive analysis of the approach towards understanding ways in which language use and social identities in ideologies create and are created by them. As explored by means of teacher discourse, the inscriptions of language ideologies can help to further the understanding of the complexities, contradictions, and implications that these ideologies bear for DLBE classroom language policy.

Beliefs and Attitudes towards Bilingualism in the Classroom

The beliefs and attitudes of teachers toward the use of bilingualism in their classroom significantly affect the determination of classroom practices. Studies show that teachers' attitudes and beliefs about being bilingual are influenced by their own competence in linguistic and cultural experiences related to teachers' bilingual education. For example, bilingual teachers or those experienced in teaching bilingual students will have a higher orientation towards holding positive attitudes for the presence of two languages in the classroom (Cummins, 2000). In the process, teachers with low linguistic competences and who are monolingual develop negative attitudes toward the practice of bilingualism in the classroom (Birman et al., 2002). In effect, research has also shown that the teacher's beliefs will be realized in classroom practices regarding bilingualism. For example, teachers with these beliefs that indeed bilingualism is an asset and the language of the native must be preserved at all costs are likely to support or put to effect effective bilingual programs in their classroom (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). On the contrary, if teachers believe that the bilingualism of their students comes as a hindrance to the academic excellence of the students, then the implication of a bilingual education program in the classroom may be relatively low.

Benefits and Challenges of Bilingualism in the Classroom

Bilingualism is associated with many benefits to the classroom environment, such as enhanced academic achievement, advancement in cognitive skills, and advancement in overall appreciation of culture. Studies have shown that students who practice bilingualism fare better, on average, in some very specific academic fields (such as problem-solving and creative thinking) than their monolingual counterparts (Bialystok, 2001). The classroom attitudes and beliefs toward bilingualism are influenced by different variables: academic training, language proficiency, and cultural exposure (Cummins, 2000; Birman et al., 2002). In fact, this illustrates how classroom teachers who are themselves bilingual, or who bring with them experience from the teaching spectrum of bilingual students, will encourage positive attitudes toward classroom bilingualism. This is on the grounds that they had first-hand information on the merits of being bilingual and the common challenges afflicting bilingual students. For example, a survey conducted among bilingual teachers in one of the elementary schools in New York City showed that teachers generally felt bilingualism to be an important tool that could help improve performance among students in that school. The teachers reported that children benefit from being bilingual by enhancing cognitive abilities, supporting cultural understanding, and even assisting in learning English.

On the other hand, teachers with limited linguistic competencies or being from monocultural backgrounds may result in negative attitudes towards the use of bilingualism in classrooms (Birman, Trickett, & Vinokurov, 2002). These teachers may view bilingualism as a barrier to academic success or as a threat to the dominant culture. For example, Lucas and Grinberg (2008) showed that some monolingual teachers in a California bilingual school perceived bilingual education as an attack to English monolingualism. They felt that such a program would close up the advancement of the student in schooling. The impact of teachers' beliefs and attitudes with respect to bilingualism does not only affect their perspective, therefore, becomes a matter of likelihood on their part in implementing the bilingual programs within their classrooms; that is, teachers who believe that bilingualism is an asset and that students should be encouraged to maintain their native language. For instance, in a study by Kibler and Kuo (2015), teachers in dual-language programs who have a favourable attitude toward bilingualism are much more likely to support students' home

language use in their classroom. On the other hand, teachers who believe that bilingualism really becomes a barrier to academic success would be least willing to put into place the programs of bilingual education in their classroom surroundings.

Benefits and Challenges of Bilingualism in the Classroom

Bilingualism within the classroom has been associated with a host of benefits, including raising academic achievement, improving cognitive skills, and enhancing culture. Studies have also demonstrated that bilingual learners outdo their monolingual counterparts in some areas of academics, more so those subjects that require problems and creativity thinking (Bialystok, 2001). Other studies have shown that bilingualism brings increased levels of cognitive flexibility, control over attention, and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001; Carlson & Meltzoff). The fact is, those cognitive gains from being bilingual might translate into academic dividends among students, such as high GPAs and good test scores (García et al., 2012). Clearly, learning in a bilingual classroom will contribute to understanding and tolerance with respect to culture. Exposing students to diverse languages and cultures will make the learner develop an even better sense of diversity and, therefore, more sensitively in the diversity (García, Arias, & Murri, 2012). It also gives a reflection that has the effect of promoting social cohesion and the inclusive nature of the school environment. From that comparison, it remains clear that the classroom-based bilingualism also has several challenges, which include lack of resources, linguistic, and cultural. Again, the paucity of resources for both staff and students in implementing the bilingual education program is one of the most important challenges to deal with. Part of them has poor resources and finances that will allow them to either develop bilingual education programs or recruit at least one more fluent language speaker teacher. Besides, students who are bilingual may have to face the linguistic barrier if he or she does not master any of the languages appropriately. These can be manifested when a student is called upon to engage in a task that most of the time, if not all the time, demands high levels of linguistic competence, such as writing an essay or interpreting complex texts (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Therefore, cultural differences may become a challenge for the bilingual student. The student may feel out of space and fear of cultural alienation from his own cultural background, or it may come as a challenge on how to negotiate between different cultural contexts (Lucas & Grinberg, 2008). They also face challenges that may range from curriculum and assessments relevant to the culture and language design to meeting the needs of a bilingual student.

Methodology

This paper set out the perceptions, attitudes, and practices carried out by teachers toward the implementation of bilingualism in the classroom, approached through a qualitative research approach. The paper used semi-structured interviews in the collection process of the teachers' information, of which ten were different teachers around Turkey who had taught bilingual students. The sample members were purposively selected to differ in educational background, linguistic capacity, and cultural experience with the researcher. The interviews were conducted in person and through a teleconferencing tool by the researcher via Zoom, therefore, making it possible for the interviews to be audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

An analysis was conducted on data that had been done thematically from this approach, patterns or themes within the data were identified. Open coding was undertaken on the data, which included a procedure through which data are reviewed in a systematic way and labelled with codes to capture the beliefs, attitudes, and practices among the participants about bilingualism in the classroom. The researcher was then in a position to group similar codes into themes and differences so that the themes, in return, contributed to answering the research questions. Thematic analysis is an approach used at the time of analysing data gathered during research. The basic purpose of thematic analysis is to identify and organize patterns and themes within the data, which provides insight into research questions. In the present research paper, an

effort was made to analyse the interview data collected by the researcher through a thematic analysis approach.

This was the first step, which was that of open coding done systematically on the data in order to capture the participants' beliefs, attitudes, and practices towards the theme 'bilingualism in the classroom'. This mainly involved thorough reading and re-reading of the data in order to draw relevant patterns, concepts, and ideas that may respond to the research questions. After this stage, each data point was assigned a code for organization and analysis, akin to how phrases, sentences, or paragraphs would have been coded. Once the data had been coded, the next step was that the researcher started organizing the data into themes depending on their similarity or difference. This was through grouping similar codes together and identifying the conceptual links between the codes so that themes could emerge. These themes were then given names and a definition provided to keenly explain their meaning and relevance to the research questions. The themes in this research paper, therefore, answered the research questions as they emerged from the analysed interview data. These themes were used to give insights into the teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices of how they conducted teaching within a bilingual classroom and to highlight some of the advantages and challenges that accrued with bilingualism as perceived from their perspectives. Further, these themes served as recommendations along with future research and practical implications for teachers, policymakers, and educators in creating the classroom as an enhanced environment for bilingual students. Thematic analysis is a rigorous and systematic way that can yield very valuable findings in data analysis with respect to a complex and nuanced occurrence, such as the use of bilingualism within the classroom. A thematic analysis is a process that helped to deduce patterns and themes within the data, which could display the underlying beliefs, attitudes, or practices that influenced teachers in their bilingual education programs.

Findings

Beliefs and Attitudes towards Bilingualism in the Classroom

Results show that the background, education, language, and cultural experiences do affect teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards the use of home language in the classrooms. Broadly, those teachers who themselves were bilingual or had teaching experiences of bilingual students in their class showed a positive attitude toward bilingualism in the classrooms. In the eyes of these teachers, bilingualism was an asset; it could, in fact, further academic success and cultural understanding. One such teacher expressed, "I believe bilingualism is an important skill for our students to have. This puts them in touch with their culture and community even when they stand prepared for a globalized world. Linguistically incompetent teachers or those raised in monocultural families mostly had their attitude negatively inclined regarding the practice of bilingualism in the classroom. Most of them almost saw it as a defect to achieving academic success. They therefore revealed that the students might lag into gaining proficiency in the English language since it exposes them to bilingual education. As one teacher was quoted, "I think teaching students in their native language is a total waste of time. They need to learn English if they want to make a living for themselves in this country.

Impact on Practices

The research shows that beliefs and attitudes in regard to the practice of bilingualism in the classroom from teachers may finally reflect the way they practice it. Teachers with positive attitudes toward bilingualism were more likely to have a bilingual curriculum of education in their classroom and encouraged students to use the home language. For instance, one teacher was once quoted: "I try to use my students' home language in my lessons whenever it is possible. I just feel like it keeps them interested, keeps their motivation up." The less open teachers with respect to the perception of bilingualism are also those who are less likely to employ classroom programs that would promote bilingual education and rather might discourage the student from using the mother tongue. For example, when a teacher is asked about her perception of

instructing in two languages, she indicates: "I don't get it, I mean, instruct in two languages? All that will do is cause a delay and get the students all muddled.

Benefits and Challenges

The results from the study unveiled that teachers perceived the benefit of bilingualism in class as a way of improving academic, cultural understanding, and language proficiency. Nonetheless, teachers found a number of challenges in the process, including the limitation of resources and even differences in cultural and language.

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Recommendations

This implies that teachers, policymakers, and educators come together so that they may be able to develop attitudes in the classroom that are more positive towards bilingualism. The development of linguistic and cultural competencies for teachers would serve to encourage these attitudes so that they could support bilingual students better. This could also include areas of training and professional development that will expose teachers to languages and cultures that will give those tools on how to design curricula and assessment in a responsive manner towards culture. The bilingual education policy is also supposed to avail the necessary resources to the programs, including the provision of bilingual teachers who are appropriately certified, facilities, materials, and the provision of language and cultural resources, as well as the development of policies in order to guide practice in the classroom. Examples of such policies are those that acknowledge the importance of bilingualism and those that support or encourage the use of the learners' home language in classroom instruction. Future researchers in the area will therefore need to investigate teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices on the use of bilingualism in classroom teaching in light of coming up with strategies that may prove viable in promoting a more positive attitude towards bilingualism and ways through which problems that tend to accrue due to bilingualism can be resolved. Future work should also strive to penetrate the academic achievements, competencies in domains far from language, and all the sociodemographic and cultural benefits that bilingualism provides for students and their communities in the end.

Discussion

This study is therefore important as it tries to fill this gap in understanding the attitude, belief, and classroom practice of teachers regarding bilingualism. It has brought out that teacher background and experience play an essential role in determining the perspectives of teachers toward bilingualism. Teachers themselves who are bilingual or have experience in the teaching of bilingual students would look more favourably upon bilingualism and would likely be perceived by the observer as more likely to be operating within a bilingual mode. On the contrary, teachers without linguistic competence and those hailing from monocultural backgrounds usually have a negative attitude toward bilingualism and are not ready to shoulder the implementation of bilingual education programs.

Teachers' beliefs and attitudes are highly connected to the instructional practices of teachers. A positive disposition towards bilingualism is one where teachers really do appreciate the virtues of being a bilingual speaker. Such teachers are likely to support the cause of implementation of bilingual education programs and the allowing of usage of home languages among learners within classrooms. Those with an attitude not oriented toward the positive side of bilingualism are always in fear of practicing the home languages among learners, and they will rarely support the students in participating in bilingual education programs. This study has highlighted the need for the development of positive attitudes and beliefs about bilingualism among the educators in order to enable them to extend useful assistance and realization of effective implementation of the program of bilingual education in schools. This would highlight the necessity for the

provision of directed professional development and support to teachers to build a more inclusive, supportive setting of learning for bilingual students. The research underscores both the benefits and challenges of bilingualism in the classroom, as identified by teachers. The benefits the teachers indicated include the increased academic achievement, increased cultural exposure, and increased proficiency in language among the benefits obtained from bilingual education. Only disadvantages may be a lack of resources, a language barrier, and cultural differences among others. Thus, it is on this account that policy should also encompass the attention of the educators to ensure resources are earmarked for bilingual education programs and policies in line with supporting classroom bilingualism. Thus, the study gave an indication that there should be a collaborative approach of teachers, policymakers, and educators to develop an improved attitude toward bilingualism in any educational setup. It has been underlined that there is a need for providing training and professional development to the teachers to improve their linguistic and cultural competencies. In this regard, policy makers and educators will have to put in resources that ensure proper implementation of the programs within bilingual education programs if they are to be of maximum effectiveness. In other words, future studies may further focus on teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices concerning the use of bilingualism in class for coming up with strategies that may help them inculcate a positive attitude among students regarding this aspect. It also recommends further investigation of the effect of bilingualism on academic achievement and social-emotional development, along with investigating the long-term beneficial effects of bilingualism for the students and the community. This, therefore, calls for further examination of the experiences of bilingual students within the classroom and appraisal of the influence that a bilingual education program confers to students, with respect to academic achievements, and socio-emotional well-being. The approach is to ensure that the understanding of the complexities of bilingualism in education results in the development of comprehensive strategies and policies worthy of meeting the needs of bilingual students and their teachers.

Research findings have indicated that, where bilingual students are concerned, overall, the efforts of bilingual education programs are positive. In the areas of increasing academic achievement, positively affecting higher graduation rates, and raising language proficiency, though, little is actually known on an empirical basis of how these are achieved or what the programs are exactly that they feel have been so successful. Future research should be able to prove what the actual influence of the instructional strategies, like code-switching, translanguaging, and scaffolding among others, is on the very learning and the classroom experience. The findings of the study will hence contribute to understanding the long-term benefits of bilingualism for the students, the communities in general, for the simple reason that a number of benefits have been linked with the same, including, among other things, good cognitive performance, cultural awareness, and employability. The knowledge of long-term effects, therefore, would firm up and help the need for bilingual education programs in successfully converting to policies and practice. Moreover, more studies should be aimed at the teachers' perspective, who, while not being bilingual themselves, have to teach bilingual children. These could be teachers who are dealing with special challenges that range from limited language and cultural knowledge to needing special training and support for their work. Insights and needs for these people would be very crucial in the development of mechanisms of helping them take up their responsibilities. The study provided insight into the belief structures, attitudes, and actions about the classroom and bilingualism of teachers; further, it warrants work that is going to help in the understanding of the full complexity that holds true for the complexities of bilingualism for education, in particular for students and their teachers.

Conclusion

This research thus enlightens the belief that teacher's beliefs, attitudes, and practices go a long way in influencing the enactment and successful implementation of classroom-based bilingual education

programs. Based on the above interview findings analysis in the case of educators throughout the United States, it is supported that teachers link, in an explicit manner, their personal experiences and, generally, their linguistic competences to the phenomena of bilingualism at schools. It means that teachers who appreciate bilingualism or who might have the experience of bilingual education by themselves are simply more conducive toward helping their students. Some of them who have little or no exposure to linguistic diversity or who have somehow developed negative perceptions regarding bilingualism would become potential barriers to such initiatives at educational levels.

The findings from this study show the need for positive perceptions and understanding of bilingualism by educators. It is not, therefore, just the upgrading of teachers' language skills and knowledge of cultural competencies through in-service training, but indeed policies that adequately make resourcing and support to the running of the bilingual education programs. Considering these major factors, then, the education stakeholders would be in a position to make sure that bilingual students are having what they need to do well, both at the academic level and in the new language. The paper goes ahead and urges that educators and policy makers across the educational divide should work in tandem with the larger educational communities to ensure that bilingualism is seen as an asset that can be harnessed in the classroom. It reiterates the importance of continuing research in looking for further innovative strategies and policies that may maximize bilingual education in the end toward a more inclusive, equitable, and linguistically diverse educational landscape.

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