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Filipino Parents' Opinions About Bilingualism and Bilingual Education Programs: Does Information Affect Support?

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Seventy-eight Filipino parents were surveyed on their opinions about bilingualism, the underlying principles of bilingual education, and placement of students in instructional programs that include a native language component. Fifty-two parents were in the comparison group, and twenty-six parents were in the experimental group. Parents in the experimental group received a phone call during which the rationale and objectives of bilingual programs were explained to them. Support for the underlying principles of bilingual education was stronger among the parents in this group. A large number of the parents had never received any information about programs that included a native language instruction component.

The presence of Filipino immigrants in the United States can be traced back to the mid-eighteenth century, when their first arrivals settled down in Louisiana, Baja California, and other coastal regions (Galang, 1988), but it was not until the 1900s that their numbers increased significantly, due to the three immigration waves that took place at the beginning of the century, between 1907 and 1934, and after 1965 (Galang, 1988). In recent years the number of Filipino Americans residing in the U.S. has experienced a tremendous growth, nearly doubling its figures from 774,652 individuals (0.3% of the total population of the country) in 1980 to 1,406,770 in 1990 (0.6% of the total) (Sentenaryo/Centennial, 2001). As a result, the Philippines is the second country by number of immigration visas issued since 1971 (Beebe & Beebe, 1981), and Filipino Americans have become the seventh largest racial/national group in the United States and the second largest Asian group in the nation ranking just behind Chinese immigrants (U.S. Census, 1990).

Unlike other populations of Asian descent, many Filipinos appear to have reached certain fluency in English prior to their arrival in the United States. This is due to a combination of factors, among them the American presence in the Philippines, the country's official bilingual policy, and interracial marriages to native English speakers (Galang, 1988). As a result, Filipino Americans seem to be less language retentive than other Asian populations (61.7% of them claim English as their usual language), and generally experience a rapid shift to English (Veltman, 1983).

California, home of more than 50% of all the Filipino Americans living in the United States (Sentenaryo/Centennial, 2001), is a clear example of these two trends, increasing number of immigrants and English fluency. Thus, the number of students of Filipino origin enrolled in K-12 public schools in the state augmented from 134,154 during the 1996-1997 school year to 144,759 five years later; of the latter, nearly 86% were classified as fluent in English on enrollment (California Department of Education, 2001a).

Familiarity with English appears to be one of the reasons why Filipino American parents tend to favor the placement of their children in transitional bilingual education when they are schooled rather than in other programs whose aim is to either maintain or develop the Filipino language (Galang, 1988). Students in transitional bilingual education receive content area instruction in their primary language as well as daily English as a Second Language (ESL) lessons; as they make progress in English throughout the grades, the amount of time devoted to delivering instruction in this language increases while the amount of time devoted to primary language instruction decreases until all instruction is delivered in English (Krashen, 1996; Krashen & Biber, 1988). As an example, while limited English proficient students usually receive content area instruction in their primary language in the lower elementary grades, by the time they are in

third and fourth grades they have generally initiated or completed their transition to formal reading and writing in English. After fourth grade they are, for the most part, placed in mainstream English classes (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1996), once they have achieved a command of this language that is comparable to that of their English-only counterparts. Transitional bilingual education, therefore, provides a temporary cushion for students who are not proficient in English and ensures that they receive the necessary help in their native language until they are prepared to receive content area and language arts instruction in English without any additional support.

The results of studies that have investigated the attitudes toward bilingualism and bilingual education programs among parents of different ethnicities, such as Hispanic (Shin & Gibbons, 1996), Hmong (Shin & Lee, 1996), Korean (Shin & Kim, 1998), and Vietnamese (Young & Tran, 1999) have revealed a large amount of support for literacy development and the delivery of subject matter in the students' primary language, two of the underlying principles of transitional bilingual education (Krashen, 1996). The original purpose of the present study was to expand this line of research by examining Filipino parents' opinions about bilingualism, the underlying principles of bilingual education, and students' participation in bilingual programs. However, this goal was modified because, as will be explained in the Data Collection section of the paper, some of the participants received additional information about the objectives and underpinnings of bilingual education programs. As a result, the purpose of the project focused on investigating whether a detailed explanation of the rationale and underlying principles of bilingualism and bilingual education programs had any effects on Filipino parents' opinions about the aforementioned issues.

The present study was carried out at an elementary school located in a large urban district in southern California. It was part of an effort aimed at gathering data for a Title VII grant proposal to be written by the author in order to create and implement a Saturday Filipino enrichment program at the school site. The program, open to any student wishing to attend regardless of race or ethnicity, was to include four components: (a) Filipino language development, (b) songs, (c) dances, (d) history, traditions, and culture of the Philippines. The first three components were to be taught in Filipino while the fourth one was to be taught in English, because it entailed a certain command of Filipino that many students might not possess at the time the program was to be implemented.

Filipino was chosen as the focal point of the enrichment program because, despite the fact that the school had the largest concentration of Filipino students in the area and that their numbers remained stable (around 9% of the total enrollment) over the years (California Department of Education, 2001b), the school had never implemented any programs

providing support in Filipino for its Filipino students. Help in this language, if needed by the students, was provided on a limited basis by the five Filipino-speaking teachers working at the school site.

Method

Subjects

The subjects participating in this study were the parents of Filipino students enrolled at the school site. At the time the study was carried out there were 148 Filipino students at the school, which comprised 9.4% of the total enrollment. They were evenly distributed among the grades: 20 in kindergarten, 27 in first grade, 30 in second grade, 26 in third grade, 22 in fourth grade, and 20 in fifth grade (California Department of Education, 2001b). In addition, 3 more Filipino students attended prekindergarten (10% of the enrollment of this program).

Instrument

The instrument utilized in this project was the survey used by Shin and Lee (1996) in their study of Hmong parents' attitudes toward bilingual education. Most of the questions remained unaltered, although, naturally, it was necessary to replace "Hmong" with "Filipino" (ethnicity and language) in the wording of the questions.

The survey, which contained 25 items, had two parts. The first part (Questions 1–6) attempted to elicit background information from the parents, such as their length of residence in the United States, educational level, current occupation, monthly income, and English proficiency level. The second part, consisting of 19 questions, requested information about Filipino or English language-related issues, such as languages spoken at home among the different members of the family, parents' attitudes towards native language instruction programs for their children, and their opinions about the underlying principles of bilingual education, bilingualism, and primary language maintenance.

Date Collection and Procedure

The author obtained a printout with the names and addresses of all the Filipino students enrolled at the school from the school database and mailed each one of them an envelope containing two documents: a cover letter and the survey used for this project. The letter asked the parents for their cooperation in answering the questionnaire and emphasized the importance of completing only one survey per family, because several families had more than one child enrolled at the school. As a result of this circumstance, the number of potential families participating in the project was reduced from 148 to 111.

Fifty-two surveys were returned to the school within the first two weeks. Four days after the last response was received, the five Filipino teachers working at the school site were asked by the researcher to make follow-up telephone calls to all the homes in order to inquire whether the parents had completed and mailed back the questionnaire. The teachers were asked to thank those parents who confirmed having returned the survey; those who had not done so were informed that the results of the analysis of their responses were to be included as part of the empirical data supporting the necessity to implement a Saturday Filipino enrichment program at the school site. They were also informed of the rationale and underlying principles of bilingual education and bilingual education programs in order to clarify the objectives of the enrichment program. The five Filipino teachers were instructed not to put any amount of pressure on the parents during the phone call that might lead the latter to complete the survey in a predetermined mode. As a result of the phone calls, 26 more questionnaires were mailed to the school in the following days; therefore, the total number of surveys returned was 78, which comprised a return rate of 70.3%.

The objectives of the phone call were to increase the return rate of the surveys and to analyze whether the explanations provided by the teachers had any effects on the parents' responses to the questionnaire. In doing so, the original purpose of this study (to examine Filipino parents' opinions about bilingual education, bilingualism, and children's participation in bilingual education programs) was modified to investigate whether the additional information received by the second group of parents had any effects on their responses to the survey and whether there were any significant differences with those of the first group of parents. Thus, those parents who returned the survey within the first two weeks formed the comparison group while those who received the additional information about bilingual education became the experimental group.

Data Analysis

Participants were not randomly assigned to either the comparison or the experimental group; however significant differences between the two groups regarding their background characteristics were not expected due to the small variability among the subjects and to the high return rate of the surveys.

Chi-square was used to analyze participants' responses to the questionnaire. Because several chi-square analyses had to be carried out, alpha was adjusted to avoid obtaining statistical significance due merely to the number of tests run. Thus, for this study, a more conservative criterion of $\alpha = .01$ was used rather than the conventional $\alpha = .05$.

Results

Table 1 summarizes participants' responses to Questions 1 through 6. Over 80% of the parents had been living in the United States for more than four years, while slightly less than 3% of them were recent arrivals, having lived in the country for less than a year. When asked about their educational level, nearly 80% of the fathers and 82% of the mothers responded having attended institutions of higher education. As for their level of proficiency in English, 91.1% of the mothers and 87.7% of the fathers reported speaking English either very fluently or fluently.

TABLE 1

Characteristics of Parents Participating in the Study (N = 78)

Survey question	%
1. Length of residency in the United States	
Less than 1 year	2.7%
1-3 years	13.3%
4-7 years	18.7%
More than 7 years	65.3%
2. Educational background of father	
Less than high school	5.8%
High school	14.5%
College	66.7%
Graduate school	13.0%
3. Educational background of mother	
Less than high school	1.4%
High school	16.7%
College	69.4%
Graduate school	12.5%
4. English proficiency of father	
Somewhat	12.3%
Fluent	46.6%
Very fluent	41.1%
5. English proficiency of mother	
Somewhat	9.0%
Fluent	38.5%
Very fluent	52.6%
6. Family income (month)	
Less than \$1,000	14.1%
\$1,001-\$2,000	42.3%
\$2,001-\$3,000	26.8%
\$3,001-\$4,000	8.5%
>\$4,000	8.5%

Finally, a majority of the families (86.1%) earned more than \$1,000 a month, with 43.8% of them earning more than \$2,000 monthly. No significant differences were found between the comparison and the experimental groups regarding their background characteristics (adjusted $\alpha = .008$).

Questions 7 through 11 inquired about languages used in the household. In their responses an almost equal number of participants responded that the primary language of their children was either Filipino (33.8%), or English (33.8%), or both (32.5%). A third of the respondents used mostly Filipino to address their children at home, and another third used mostly English. Finally, 57.1% of them reported encouraging the use of both languages at home. However, only 10.4% of the children used Filipino when addressing their parents, compared to 28.6% who used English. A similar scenario was revealed when parents were asked about the language of interaction between children at home: 9.5% of the children used Filipino to communicate with their siblings, while 31.1% of them used English. These responses are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Language Use in the Household (N = 78)

Survey question	%
7. Children's primary language	
Filipino	33.8%
English	33.8%
Both	32.5%
8. Language spoken to children at home	
Filipino	19.5%
English	13.0%
Mostly Filipino	33.8%
Mostly English	33.8%
9. Language spoken by children when responding	
Filipino	10.4%
English	28.6%
Mostly Filipino	23.4%
Mostly English	37.7%
10. Language spoken between children at home	
Filipino	9.5%
English	31.1%
Mostly Filipino	28.4%
Mostly English	31.1%
11. Language you encourage your children to speak at home	
Filipino	14.3%
English	28.6%
Both	57.1%

Questions 15 through 21 related to parents' opinions about the underlying principles of bilingual education and children's participation in bilingual education programs (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Parents' Responses to Rationale of and Children's Participation in Bilingual Programs

Survey question	Yes	No	Not sure
21. Do you think that your child needs to develop literacy in his/her primary language in order to facilitate the acquisition of English? (N = 78)	37.2%	41%	21.8%
19. Do you think that teaching subject matter in Filipino allows your child to keep up in subject matter while acquiring English?			
Comparison Group (n = 52)	36.5%	38.5%	25.0%
Experimental Group (n = 26)	76.9%	7.7%	15.4%
	Yes	No	Don't know
15. If your child is not proficient in English, would you approve of your child being in a classroom learning Filipino (reading/writing) as part of the curriculum? (N = 78)	50.7%	39.4%	9.9%
16. If your child is not proficient in English, would you approve of your child being in a classroom learning subject matter (e.g., mathematics or science) in Filipino? (N = 78)	52.1%	42.3%	5.6%
	English only	Bilingual	Not sure
17. If your child is not proficient in English, would you prefer him/her to be enrolled in an English-only classroom or a bilingual classroom where both Filipino and English are used as a medium of instruction?			
Comparison group (n = 52)	50%	32.7%	17.3%
Experimental group (n = 26)	15.4%	76.9%	7.7%

Note. Responses to Questions 17 and 19 are reported separately by group, and differences are statistically significant at $p < .01$. Responses to the other questions are not statistically different and are reported as total sample.

Responses related to underpinnings of bilingual education found that slightly more than 37% of the parents agreed that their children needed to develop literacy in their primary language in order to facilitate their English acquisition process. However, when they were asked whether they thought that teaching subject matter in Filipino helped children keep up in subject matter while acquiring English (Question 19), nearly 77% of the parents in the experimental group agreed, compared to 37% of parents in the comparison group. The difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 12.2, p < .01$.

Responses related to participation in bilingual programs for students not proficient in English showed that nearly 51% of the parents responded that they would place their children in classrooms that taught reading and writing in Filipino as part of the school curriculum (Question 15), and 52.1% would place their children in a program that taught students subject matter in this language (Question 16). Parents' responses to whether they would choose an English-only or a bilingual program for their children if the children were identified as not proficient in English showed significant differences, $\chi^2(1, N = 78) = 13.68, p < .01$, between the two groups (Question 17). While 50% of the parents in the comparison group answered that they would place their children in English-only programs, this percentage decreased to 15.4% among those parents in the experimental group. While 32.7% of the parents in the comparison group supported bilingual education programs, this percentage reached 76.9% among parents in the experimental group.

An examination of Table 4 reveals that parents appeared to have a very favorable view of bilingualism. Thus, 73% of them agreed that bilingualism could lead to career-related advantages, 74% responded that bilingualism could result in higher development of knowledge or mental skills, 82.2% agreed that it was necessary to maintain their children's primary language, and 66.2% of them supported maintenance programs in Filipino at school.

Finally, the last two statements in the survey asked participants whether they had received any information about issues related to native language instruction programs at school and whether they had their children enrolled in English as a Second Language classes. In their responses, only 18.1% of the parents responded that they had been informed of primary language-related topics, and 74% of them responded that their children did not participate in ESL classes.

Discussion

An examination of participants' responses to the first six items of the survey revealed that a large majority of the parents were well educated and bilingual in Filipino and English, a perk that puts them in a very advantageous situation over many immigrant families of other ethnicities,

advantageous situation over many immigrant families of other ethnicities, because they can provide their children with language and academic support at home.

TABLE 4
Parents' Perceptions of Bilingualism

Survey question	Yes	No	Don't know
22. Do you believe that high levels of bilingualism can lead to practical, career-related advantages?	73%	16.2%	10.8%
23. Do you believe that high levels of bilingualism can result in higher development of knowledge or mental skills?	74%	20.5%	5.5%
24. Do you feel it is necessary to maintain your child's primary language?	82.2%	12.3%	5.5%
18. If your child is proficient in both Filipino and English, would you like him/her to be enrolled in a classroom where Filipino is part of the curriculum?	66.2%	29.6%	4.2%

Participant responses to questions inquiring about language use in the household appeared to exemplify the language shift among Filipinos described by Veltman (1983). Thus, noticeably, the percentage (29%) of children using English when responding to their parents was nearly triple the percentage (10%) that used Filipino, and a similar scenario occurred when the children communicated with their siblings. Parents, however, were more likely to communicate with their children in Filipino. About 20% of the parents reported addressing their children in Filipino and an additional 34% used mostly Filipino when interacting with them.

An examination of the responses to items regarding support for primary language maintenance, the benefits of bilingualism, and opinions about bilingual education appeared to show a certain lack of consistency among the subjects. Thus, despite the fact that 82.2% of the parents supported primary language maintenance, only about one half of the parents reported speaking Filipino to their children. While about three fourths of them thought that bilingualism could lead to career-related advantages and could also result in higher development of knowledge or mental skills, a smaller

percentage (57%) reported encouraging their children to use both languages at home. While about half of the parents reported speaking either English or mostly English to their children at home, slightly less than a third of them encouraged their children to speak only this language in the household.

Finally, only one parent in the experimental group had her child enrolled in Filipino Saturday school. A possible explanation for this discrepancy might be that parental support for Filipino maintenance was largely determined by whether children had achieved proficiency in English. Thus, two thirds of the parents would support the maintenance of Filipino for children who were proficient in English; on the other hand, only half of them would do so if their children had not yet achieved proficiency in this language.

Responses to questions asking about the underlying principles of bilingual education and about participation in Filipino bilingual programs reflected some interesting trends. Thus, there were no significant differences between parents in the comparison and in the experimental groups when they were asked about the importance of primary language literacy development, both as one of the principles underlying bilingual education ("Do you think that your child needs to develop literacy in his/her primary language in order to facilitate the acquisition of English?") and when referring to the actual participation of limited English proficient children in bilingual education programs ("If your child is not proficient in English, would you approve of your child being in a classroom learning Filipino [reading and writing] as part of the curriculum?"). However, when they were asked whether they thought that teaching subject matter in Filipino allowed children to keep up in subject matter while acquiring English, it appeared that the additional explanations received by those parents in the experimental group significantly increased their support for the statement (76.9% of the parents in the experimental group agreed, as compared to only 36.5% in the comparison group, the difference being statistically significant). This might be due to the fact that parents felt that their command of both Filipino and English would enable them to provide support at home, if necessary, in language arts and reading and writing in English, and to maintain Filipino in the household. They might also have thought that it was a good idea to reinforce the subject matter taught in English at school with additional explanations in Filipino in order to ensure that children understand the explanations, due to the likely complexity of the terminology used by teachers when delivering content area instruction.

Finally, parents in the experimental group showed a strong support for the placement of limited English proficient children in bilingual education instead of in English-only programs once they were informed of the rationale and underlying principles of the former.

Conclusion

As the results of the present project reveal, Filipino parents recognized the advantages of bilingualism, although they seemed to favor English as the language of interaction for and with their children. However, they were not opposed to the implementation of school programs that included support in Filipino once they were informed of their rationale and underlying principles. The more detailed the information they received, the stronger they appeared to support them. It appears necessary, therefore, to make a concerted effort at disseminating information among parents (in the present project, nearly 82% of the parents reported not having received explanations about native language instruction programs at school) regarding the content, structure, and academic objectives of programs that include a native language component in order to clarify their goals and to explain their benefits. This will translate into a better understanding of how they work and will help dispel the many different misconceptions the general public has about these programs and about other issues related to bilingualism and bilingual education in general.

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