Second Language Acquisition Programs: An Assessment of the Bilingual Education Debate

Jessica Cruz
Grand Valley State University
Abstract
Second language acquisition programs are frequently misunderstood, as various programs are often mistakenly labeled as bilingual education. Inaccurate labeling creates confusion and fuels the already heated bilingual education debate. The purpose of this research is to clearly define different second language acquisition programs, assess major arguments on opposing sides of this nationwide debate, and discuss program evaluations from the 1991 Ramirez investigation and the Rossell and Baker study (1996). In so doing, important issues regarding the world of second language acquisition programs will surface. Expectantly, this research will generate, or continue, further discussion addressing these concerns in an effort to ameliorate the confusion surrounding second language acquisition programs.

Introduction
In the United States, bilingual education has been the focus of a heated nationwide debate since the 1968 implementation of the Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Ambert & Melendez, 1985; Padilla, 1983). Today, thirty-seven years later, bilingual education continues to generate controversy, as linguistically diverse students are the fastest growing group of students in the United States (Samway & McKeon, 1999). Different parts of the country have had their own responses to the increase of non-native English speakers. California, for example, passed Proposition 227, an anti-bilingual education amendment, in 1998 while other parts of the country further developed and enhanced previous bilingual education program models (Adamson, 2005).

Bilingual education may be the center of the debate, but the debate is the center of field research. Numerous investigations have been executed to test the efficacy of individual second language acquisition programs including bilingual education programs; however, the validity of these studies is the focus of yet another dispute. The battle seems never ending; each argument is continuously supported or refuted by both sides of the debate. The goal in this research is not to conclude who is right and who is wrong, nor is it simply to explain the rationale behind the two opposing sides of this debate. Instead, the objective is to examine the dynamics of the debate itself. An analysis of the debate's structure will help unveil underlying issues, which may prevent the perpetuation of this deliberation. The analysis will begin with a detailed description of major second language acquisition programs, followed by an explanation of the rationale behind the support for different programs on opposing sides of the debate. Having
Methodology
The variation amongst second language acquisition programs happens to be the center of an extremely controversial debate currently taking place across the nation. Professionals within the field, program participants, and concerned parents all have differing opinions. Unfortunately, many of those opinions lack a solid educational foundation, as not all are truly aware of the differences and similarities between programs. Hence, I will begin my study by exploring the uniqueness of individual second language acquisition programs. Furthermore, in an effort to increase accurate program awareness, a definition and a description of the three major program models of second language acquisition (immersion, English as a Second Language, and bilingual education) will be provided in the form of a brief literature review.

After describing the three major program models of second language acquisition programs, the assessment of the national debate will begin. Although the programs can be categorized differently depending on the underlying issue being addressed within the debate, I have decided to focus specifically on the issue of the use of the native language as an instruction tool. Doing so will force the study to concentrate particularly on arguments for and against bilingual education because the use of the native language within the classroom is bilingual education's defining factor. Following these guidelines, the debate will be broken up into two groups: one against and one in favor of bilingual education, each containing different second language acquisition programs as supporting subgroups.

Once the major categories of second language acquisition programs are correctly distributed as subgroups for the debate, the most controversial matters will be addressed. These matters will include the dynamics and the history of this significant debate. Segregation, cognitive development, the assimilation versus acculturation debate, and language acquisition theories used to support specific programs will be addressed as well. In addition to these issues, I will also include a section discussing program evaluations concerning the academic achievement and success rates of linguistically diverse students, or non-native English speaking children. The 1991 Ramirez investigation will undoubtedly be one of the evaluations discussed, but the Rossell and Baker study (1996) will also be included in order to provide an opposing perspective. After comparing and contrasting second language acquisition programs, considering both sides of the debate, and analyzing current available data furnished by these various programs and experts in the field, a deductive reasoning may be formed regarding which program is most beneficial for linguistically diverse students. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the issue of efficacy with regards to second language acquisition programs in the United States.

Second Language Acquisition Programs: An Overview of Available Literature
Before beginning the assessment of the debate, one must first be familiar with second language acquisition programs themselves, their unique approaches to language acquisition, and their stated objectives. For instance, there are three general types of programs: immersion, English as a Second Language (ESL), and bilingual education. In immersion programs, also known as submersion programs, linguistically diverse students are expected to follow the traditional “sink or swim” method—a method through which the student is expected to perform at a level equivalent to that of his or her classmates without receiving additional help. The fact that the student is not capable of comprehending the English language is not taken into consideration. Instead, a linguistically diverse student is simply exposed to the target language, English, through the instruction of academic content in that language (Brisk, 1998). It is important to remember that native languages are not incorporated into immersion programs. Immersion’s main objective is to have students acquire English proficiency as soon as possible through continuous and constant submersion within the language (Brisk; Baker & Jones, 1998).

In the second program, English as a Second Language, or ESL, the needs of linguistically diverse students are recognized. Although this program uses English as the sole language of instruction, it acknowledges the needs of linguistically diverse children by using a simplified version of the English language, pictures, and gestures to facilitate and ensure effective communication between the students and the teacher. This program is typically referred to as ESL Pullout because it often removes a child from the mainstream English-only classroom for a period of the day to provide target language instruction (Baker & Jones, 1998). After this instruction takes place, the child is returned to the mainstream classroom. ESL’s purpose is to have the student become proficient in the English language and participate in a mainstream English-only classroom without an ESL Pullout component as soon as possible (Ambert & Melendez, 1985).

The third program, bilingual education, is the only second language acquisition program employing the native language as an instruction tool. Bilingual education is implemented in a variety of ways, yet these programs
typically fall under one of bilingual education's major subgroups, transitional bilingual education or developmental bilingual education (Baker & Jones, 1998). Transitional bilingual education is the most commonly used form of bilingual education programs. In transitional programs, the native language is used as an instruction tool to facilitate intense English language instruction as well as to prevent the child from falling behind in academic areas such as mathematics or science (Castro Feinberg, 2002). Ideally, participants of this program are expected to make a transition from bilingual education to the mainstream English-only instruction within a few years. In developmental bilingual education, the native language is not simply used to facilitate intense English language instruction. Instead, it is employed in an effort to produce bilingualism within its participants. The main focus of developmental programs is to develop as well as maintain cognitive skills in the native language while acquiring English proficiency and fluency (Watts, 2005). The program’s goal is therefore to develop bilingualism and acculturation instead of monolingualism and accelerated assimilation into the mainstream English-only classroom, as is the case with the other second language acquisition programs.

While immersion, ESL, and bilingual education are the major program models for second language acquisition, many other models are also implemented throughout the United States. Programs such as structured immersion, for example, are a combination of immersion and ESL because measures are taken to ensure communication between the teacher and the student, yet the student’s native language is not used as an instruction tool (Brisk, 1998). Unlike ESL, participants are not pulled out of the mainstream English-only classroom. Instead, students are simply placed and kept in one classroom with other linguistically diverse students for the entire day (Baker & Jones, 1998). In a sense, structured immersion can be viewed as an extension of ESL.

The Bilingual Education Debate
Most educators as well as parents of linguistically diverse children agree that the main goal of second language acquisition programs is the concurrent mastery of English language proficiency and subsequent academic success. Unfortunately, not many agree on how programs are to carry out their purpose nor is there a consensus on whether second language acquisition programs are, or should be, addressing the linguistic and cultural needs of non-English speaking minorities (Samway & McKeon, 1999). This along with the previously mentioned Bilingual Education Act of 1968 has led to a nationwide debate, which has been ongoing because the Act’s goal was never clearly defined (Padilla, 1983).

Debate Dynamics and Format
On one side of the debate, we have what I will refer to as Group A. This group is completely against bilingual education, but not second language acquisition programs, because they are against the use of the native language for classroom instruction, which is exactly what bilingual education is. Second language acquisition programs, however, also include programs that do not use a language other than English as an instructional medium. Therefore, although Group A may be against bilingual education itself, it is not necessarily against second language acquisition programs in general. In fact, Group A branches off into two separate subgroups, each favoring a different type of second language acquisition program—immersion or ESL.

On the other side of the debate, we have Group B, which is in favor of bilingual education, i.e. the use of the native language as an instruction tool. As was the case with Group A, Group B also branches off into two separate subgroups, each favoring a different type of second language acquisition program, which in this case are bilingual programs. The two supporting second language acquisition subgroups for Group B are transitional and developmental bilingual education.

Before beginning the assessment of the debate’s rationale, it is important to note that although ESL and transitional bilingual education lie on opposite sides of the bilingual education debate, they often have more similarities than differences. As will be discussed later, ESL and transitional bilingual education tend to yield similar results when evaluated for participant academic success (Rossell & Baker, 1996). The reason for this may be that both programs have a common goal—the assimilation of the recipients into the mainstream English-only classroom and thus society as soon as possible. However, each program employs different methods in achieving this objective. Because the main stylistic difference stems from the use of the native language for instruction, the two programs are categorized in opposition to one another within the bilingual education debate.

Foundational Arguments
The first disagreement between the two groups is, of course, the use of a language other than English for classroom instruction; the second foundational argument concerns the history of bilingual education. Although this is truer for supporters of immersion than for supporters of ESL, Group A believes that if past immigrants succeeded in the United State of America without bilingual education, then current immigrants should be expected to do the same
Bilingual programs are also believed to produce segregation since linguistically diverse students are taken out of the mainstream English-only classroom and placed in a different, separate classroom in which the student only has contact with other linguistically diverse students (Guzman, 2002; Baker, 1996).

Group B, on the other hand, affirms that although the Bilingual Education Act was implemented in 1968, it did not mark bilingual education’s birth (Baker, 1996). It merely provided funding for previously implemented programs. Bilingual education in reality existed long before 1968. In fact, in 1863 a German high school was established in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and a bilingual institute was founded by Cuban exiles in 1871 (Castro Feinberg, 2002; Duignan, 2002). Group B also negates Group A’s second argument regarding segregation. While some bilingual education programs such as ESL and transitional bilingual programs do indeed segregate its participants, developmental bilingual programs do not. In developmental bilingual education, programs such as dual or two-way language immersion place in the same classroom students who speak only English and students who have yet to learn English. These classrooms unite all students regardless of linguistic backgrounds. Dual or two-way immersion programs help native English speakers learn the linguistically diverse students’ native language while non-native English students, in turn, learn English. This dual language instruction is an effort to induce bilingualism and acceptance of other languages and cultures, not racism or segregation (Brisk, 1998).

Cognitive Development
Cognitive development is a highly discussed matter within this debate. Group A believes the simultaneous development of the native and target languages will inevitably cause cognitive delays in participants of bilingual education programs. This belief is based on the underlying idea that the simultaneous development of two languages, or bilingualism in general, creates cognitive confusion because the child will have to constantly differentiate between two languages (Brisk, 1998). Group B, however, argues that cognitive confusion and delay are actually the greatest misunderstanding in the world of second language acquisition. Since the 1960s, research has continually shown that bilingual and even monolingual students display far more cognitive advantages than monolingual students, once the child’s mind is well developed. In 1962, psychologists Peale and Lambert conducted a groundbreaking study regarding the association between bilingualism and cognitive ability and found that bilingualism does indeed positively affect intelligence; these results were later confirmed by Nandita in 1984 and by Bochner in 1996 through the use of modern experimental techniques (qtd. in Guzman, 2002).

Assimilation versus Acculturation
Supporters of immersion and ESL believe assimilation is the key to success in this country. They believe that by assimilating into the dominant culture, linguistically diverse students will have access to the same opportunities as native English speakers (Baker & Jones, 1998). Therefore, a child who is placed in an English-only classroom will assimilate into the dominant culture sooner, which will allow the linguistically diverse student to succeed in the United States before his or her bilingual education counterparts. Accordingly, Group A believes English should be the only language used within the United States. English-only is favored by this group not only because they believe it will accelerate assimilation, but also because this group views bilingualism as a means of linguistic segregation. In their opinion, bilingualism will only further segregate this country through linguistic and cultural categorization, thus reinforcing discrimination rather than racial harmony and unity under one common language (Crawford, 1998).

As for Group B, while transitional bilingual education does aim for assimilation, it nonetheless accepts the value of the native language and recognizes the benefits of bilingualism, unlike immersion or ESL programs. However, correctly implemented developmental bilingual education programs do in fact lead to acculturation, or the addition of a foreign culture onto one’s own. This philosophy is far more accepting of other cultures than is assimilation because assimilation is the replacement of a native culture with the dominant one (Baker & Jones, 1998). Expectedly, Group B is against English-only within the United States because this group considers monolingualism to be a practice of intolerance based on the fear of the unknown.

Language Acquisition Theories
Second language acquisition programs conveniently use language acquisition theories for support. For example, immersion programs will often refer to the Sink or Swim or Time on Task theories. The Sink or Swim Theory simply states that if a child is surrounded by the target language twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the child will pick up the language (Brisk, 1998). This theory is further supported by the Time on Task Theory which states that the more time spent on a given task within a classroom, the faster the child will accomplish the task (Rossell & Baker, 1996). The combination of these two theories justifies the structure, or lack thereof, in immersion programs.
English as a Second Language programs also use the Time on Task Theory because this program does not utilize the native language as an instruction tool, yet ESL does have an additional theory—the Comprehension of Target Language Input Theory. This theory argues that in order for the child to learn the target language, the child must first be able to comprehend the information (s)he is receiving. After all, time spent on any given task is of no value if input is incomprehensible. In the words of Krashen, a well-known linguistic researcher and professor of the University of Southern California, it is a matter of quality not quantity (qtd. in Cromwell, 1998). Hence, ESL's use of a simplified version of the English language, gestures, pictures, and any other methods helping to ensure communication are justified through the Comprehension of Target Language Input Theory.

As mentioned earlier, ESL and transitional bilingual education have more similarities than they do differences because both have the same goal, assimilation into the mainstream English-only classroom as soon as possible. Therefore, it is not at all shocking for transitional bilingual education to use the same theories as ESL for support. However, because transitional bilingual education employs the native language while ESL does not, time spent on task is decreased and comprehension of target language input is increased in transitional bilingual education programs.

Developmental bilingual education not only uses theories to support its program approaches, but it also refutes the arguments of the Sink or Swim Theory used by immersion programs. Supporters of this program argue that linguistically diverse students do not just pick up a language by being immersed within it; language input must be comprehensible (Krashen, 1996). Furthermore, when students do begin to acquire a degree of target language competency through immersion programs, they learn the vernacular, or familiar, version of the target language, for this version is highly contextualized thus helping the input become comprehensible to the child. The vernacular version of the target language, however, is not enough to suffice because academic language is decontextualized, which forces the student to comprehend the input with less contextual help (Krashen).

Developmental bilingual education uses the Time on Task and Comprehension of Target Language theories for support. However, the time spent on the task of learning the English language is decreased and comprehension of target language input is increased even more than in transitional bilingual education because more time is spent on the native language in developmental than in transitional programs. This is due to the fact that developmental programs include both 90-10 and 50-50 program models (Baker & Jones, 1998). The 90-10 model begins with 90% native language instruction and 10% English language instruction during the first year, then 80% native language instruction and 20% English language instruction during the second year, and so on until 50-50 is reached. The 50-50 model, however, simply begins with 50% instruction of both languages; there is no continual change, the model remains constant for its entire duration (Baker & Jones). Finally, developmental bilingual education programs also gain support from the Facilitation Theory, which states that when cognitive abilities are developed, language acquisition becomes much easier because an educational foundation has been set for language instruction. Once a student knows and understands the concept of literacy, the child will apply the newly learned concept to all languages (Rossell & Baker, 1996). This theory also states that cognitive abilities are best developed in the native language and are readily transferable into additionally acquired languages. It, therefore, makes sense to develop skills in the native language in order to best develop the child’s cognitive abilities as well as to facilitate additional language acquisition (Watts, 2005). It is for this reason that developmental bilingual education focuses on both developing and maintaining a linguistically diverse student’s native language while acquiring English.

**Conceptual Assessment of Existing Programs**

Evaluations fuel the on-going controversy surrounding bilingual education because results are inconsistent from study to study; some studies are in favor of bilingual education while others are not. The purpose here is not to conclude which studies are valid and reliable, but rather to outline some of the major issues pertaining to this topic by examining two examples of controversial studies.

**The Ramirez Report**

In 1991, a national longitudinal study supported by the U.S. Department of Education reported its long-awaited results. The Ramirez Report, as it is informally referred to after its primary investigator, compared the academic progress of Latino elementary school children participating in different bilingual education programs such as structured English immersion, early-exit transitional bilingual education (exit after approximately two years), and late-exit transitional bilingual education (exit after approximately four to five years). The data was collected over a period of four years from over 2,300 Spanish-speaking students in 554 classrooms (K-6) in New York, New
Overall, the study concluded that linguistically diverse students in immersion and early-exit transitional programs progressed academically at the same rate as students from the general population. However, the gap between participants and general population students remained large. Furthermore, program participants did not fall further behind, but the gap between the two student populations was not bridged. This finding refutes the belief that increased English instruction leads to improved English language achievement because early-exit transition students had less English instruction, yet performed at the same level as immersion participants (Cummins, 1992). In contrast, according to the study, as in mathematics and English language, it seems that those students who received the strongest opportunity to develop their primary language skills, realized a growth in their English reading skills that was greater than that of the norming population used in this study. If sustained, in time these students would be expected to catch up and approximate the average achievement level of this norming population. (qtd. in Cummins & Genzuk, 1991 p. 2)

Rossell and Baker
An example of a study against bilingual education is that of Rossell and Baker. The study attempted to answer the question, “Is transitional bilingual education (TBE) the best method for teaching limited English proficient (LEP) students?” In an effort to assess the educational effectiveness of transitional bilingual education, Rossell and Baker compared it to other second language acquisition programs including immersion/submersion, ESL, and structured immersion. This study did not collect original data; instead it reviewed data from previous studies which Rossell and Baker found to be acceptable. Of a total 500 studies read, 300 of which were evaluations, 72 were found to be methodologically acceptable. This constituted a mere 25% of the total studies read (Rossell & Baker, 1996).

When comparing TBE to immersion/submersion, or doing nothing, 22% of the studies showed TBE to be superior, 33% showed it to be worse, and 45% showed no difference. A comparison between TBE and ESL showed TBE to be superior 0% of the time, worse 29% of the time, and no different 71% of the time (Rossell & Baker, 1996). Furthermore, since immersion programs also have an ESL component, Rossell and Baker compared TBE to immersion/ESL. The findings were very similar to the previous ones; TBE was better in 19% of the studies, worse in 33%, and no different in 48% (Rossell & Baker). The next two programs compared were TBE and structured immersion. TBE was shown to be better than bilingual education in 0% of the studies, worse in 83%, and no different in 17% (Rossell & Baker). Structured immersion was then compared to ESL. The results demonstrated structured immersion to be better in 100% of the studies, but only three studies were evaluated. Finally, the last comparison was between TBE and maintenance bilingual education. In this comparison, TBE was shown to be better in 100% percent of the studies (Rossell & Baker). However, only one study was used for this comparison.

This data suggests that the ideal program for second language acquisition is structured immersion where instruction is in English, in a self-contained classroom consisting entirely of LEP students, and at an appropriate level for students to understand. It therefore supports the Time on Task and Comprehension of Target Language Input Theories, but refutes the Facilitation Theory. While Rossell and Baker (1996) state that structured immersion appears to be more effective, Krashen (1999) suggests that further methodologically sound research needs be conducted in order to make intelligent decisions.

Discussion
This debate may have its origins in the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, but misconceptions about bilingual education, bilingualism (or multilingualism for that matter), and the inconsistencies in program evaluations have kept the dispute alive. Misconceptions will always be present, but why are there inconsistencies within data furnished by these programs? One explanation may be the lack of terminological consensus within the field. Certain second language acquisition programs have a number of names or aliases, which can create confusion amongst the public and professionals. Given the abundance of titles for identical programs, studies should always include an accurate and detailed description of the program(s)
evaluated. Doing so will prevent confusion or misinterpretation of gathered data as has been the case in past studies.

Often times, certain programs will purposely be mislabeled for funding purposes. ESL, for example, was often labeled as bilingual education as a tactic to obtain federal funding since the Bilingual Education Act provided funding for programs using a language other than English for classroom instruction, a characteristic not shared by ESL program models. This tactic, however, only caused misunderstandings and therefore misinterpretations of data because data gathered from so-called bilingual programs were actually gathered from ESL programs. The inclusion of accurate descriptions of program models in studies and a consensus amongst professionals regarding terminology within the field will help generate valid conclusions from reliable experiments. These conclusions can then be generalized to similar program models in an effort to address the issue of bilingual education efficacy.

While mislabeling and lack of terminological consensus are issues in need of urgent attention, the layout of the debate must also be taken into consideration. According to the debate’s usual format, supporters of bilingual education, or the use of the native language in the classroom, are against those opposing bilingual education. This may not necessarily be the case, especially in reference to ESL and transitional bilingual education (TBE). As previously mentioned, ESL and TBE have more similarities than differences, a fact that is often overlooked. While the nature of ESL may seem contradictory to that of TBE due to the fact that one employs the native language while the other does not, the two programs have the same objective -- to assimilate the linguistically diverse child into the mainstream English-only classroom as soon as possible without developing or maintaining the child’s native language. This similarity actually places these programs on the same side of many of the issues addressed within the debate, as demonstrated by their positions on the assimilation versus acculturation discussion. Furthermore, the nature of the ESL and TBE may be against developmental bilingual education, but the implementers of these two programs may actually be in favor of the developmental model. Many times ESL and TBE programs are implemented instead of developmental programs for financial reasons because developmental bilingual education is both rare and costly. Therefore, when developmental programs are fiscally impossible, TBE becomes the next best option. The same is true for situations in which TBE is not a possibility; ESL becomes the next best option for those who oppose immersion. Although the two programs by definition may be against developmental bilingual education, their implementers may not be. In fact, implementers of ESL or TBE may be in favor of acculturation rather than assimilation, but this is far from obvious when solely examining the programs themselves. Therefore, the debate is by no means always an accurate description of implementers’ true feelings.

**Conclusion**

Programs showing respect for the native language yield the most favorable results not only because multilingualism is favorable for cognitive development, but also for cultural reasons. When a child’s native language is not incorporated into the curriculum, the child is indirectly receiving a message stating that his or her native language is inferior to the dominant language. Linguistically diverse children are thus culturally empowered by the use of the native language within a classroom. This inclusion therefore relays a message of worthiness and equivalence, for the dominant language is no longer superior to the minority, or native, language.

In general, literature seems to be in favor of correctly implemented bilingual education programs, regardless of the label placed upon program models. On the other hand, research shows that bilingual education programs are not as effective as they could be (Adamson, 2005). Further development is needed in order for students to fully experience all of bilingual education’s benefits. Yet, in order to avoid prolonging the already impassioned debate, the lack of terminological consensus and the effects of the debate’s dynamics should all be considered as well as further analyzed. Doing so will ensure a desperately needed positive progression, as this debate has become stagnant from the constant refuting.
References


