
Loco, Completamente Loco

The Many Failures of “Bilingual Education”

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This selection first appeared in *Reason Magazine*'s January 1998 edition. Glenn Garvin is a contributor editor for *Reason Magazine* and author of the *Reason* articles “No Fruits, No Shirts, No Service” (April 1995) and “Bringing the Border War Home” (October 1995), which were finalists for the National Magazine Award.

Rosa Torres had been dreading this call. Her daughter Angelica's first-grade teacher wanted to come over and talk. The teacher didn't say what she wanted to discuss, but Rosa knew. There had been a program on television, and the unfamiliar English words had rung in her head like a fire alarm: learning disorder. Surely that was what little Angelica had.

Every afternoon when she came home from school, Rosa asked the same question: What did you do in school today? And every day Angelica gave the same answer: Nothing. She seemed bored, listless, maybe even—though Rosa didn't see how it was possible for a six-year-old—depressed.

Rosa wondered how a child developed a learning disorder. Certainly there had been no sign of it a couple of years before, when Angelica started preschool at the YMCA. Rosa had been so worried, sending her little girl off without a word of English to spend a day among the American children. But everything had worked out just fine. Angelica rolled through there like a snowball, picking up more and more English every day. Soon she spoke it much better than Rosa, and after a while she spoke it much better than Spanish.

Of course, that wasn't surprising. After all, Angelica was an American, born just a few miles down the freeway from their home in Redwood City, a scruffy working-class town 30 miles south of San Francisco. It was her parents Rosa and Carlos who were the immigrants. They left Cuzco, the ancient Inca city in central Peru, with plans to study in America, learn English, get college degrees, live the good life.

Like most immigrants, they found out it wouldn't be all so easy as that—American landlords and shopkeepers wanted to be paid in cash, not dreams. Classes gave way to jobs, the kind you get when you can't

speaking English. Carlos was baking pizzas for a little more than minimum wage, Rosa babysitting for a little less. She spent her days with the children massaging the little bit of English she'd picked up in a couple of community college classes; the three- and four-year-olds were patient professors, never complaining about her fractured sentences, content to point at the big white thing in the kitchen and repeat the word refrigerator a hundred times if that was what it took for Rosa to get it. For adult company, she watched television while they napped, puzzling over Oprah's vocabulary as much as her ethos, smiling in secret delight whenever she got one of Regis and Kathie Lee's jokes.

The life, if not exactly the one she'd dreamed, wasn't a bad one. No one was sick, no one went to bed hungry. There was a roof over their heads. Little by little, they were adjusting to America. But now there was this trouble with Angelica. Apprehensively, Rosa waited, tried to steel herself to hearing the words *learning disorder* not from a disembodied voice on TV but from the teacher's lips; not affixed to some unfortunate, not-quite-real children from another part of the planet, but to her own daughter, right here, right now.

The teacher turned out to be a Japanese lady (well, American, really; Rosa had to keep reminding herself how it worked here) with a manner that was at once kindly and intense. "I think you need to go talk to the principal at the school about Angelica," she said after they settled in. "What about her?" Rosa said, stomach churning, knowing the answer, dreading it.

"I think you need to get her into an English-speaking classroom," the teacher replied. "She understands English perfectly. And she doesn't like taking lessons in Spanish. I think it's really holding her back. It's damaging her."

"What do you mean, Spanish?" Rosa asked, silently cursing Oprah and Kathie Lee, who had obviously failed her, because this teacher wasn't making any sense.

"Spanish, that's what we're teaching her in," the teacher said. "Didn't anyone tell you? She's in a bilingual education program. Just go tell the principal she speaks English, and you want her out." When the teacher left, Rosa still found it hard to believe the whole conversation hadn't been some horrendous translation glitch. The teacher had explained that Angelica, because she was Hispanic, had been swept into a class full of immigrant children from Mexico and El Salvador who spoke little or no English. OK, Rosa could understand how that might

have happened. But why were the children being taught Spanish instead of English? How were they ever going to learn English if the school didn't teach it to them?

Nonetheless, a conversation with Angelica confirmed it. All day long, her teacher spoke Spanish. The books were in Spanish. Even the posters on the classroom wall were in Spanish.

Only for a few minutes in the afternoon did the language switch to English. "And then we just learn some baby words like *bread* or *paper*," Angelica complained. Summoning the most malevolent curse in her six-year-old vocabulary, she cried: "*It's dumb!*" Finally Rosa understood her daughter's moody shuffling of the past few months.

The solution, unfortunately, was not as simple as the teacher promised. When Rosa went in to see the school administrators a few days later, her request to transfer Angelica into an English-speaking class met with withering disapproval. "That's not in your daughter's best interests," one of the school officials said. They flashed incomprehensible charts around, used a lot of language Rosa didn't understand, but the message came through loud and clear: *We know better, we're the teachers.*

Rosa was doubtful. The idea that kids would learn English by being taught in Spanish all day seemed, well, kind of nuts—especially for Angelica, whose best language was English. But . . . but . . . who was she to question them? An immigrant babysitter lady who spent her days in pathetic conversations with four-year-olds about who was smarter, Big Bird or the Cookie Monster? When Rosa left the office, her daughter was still enrolled in the Spanish class.

Each morning for the next two years, she watched Angelica mope off to a school that bored her nearly to tears. Each afternoon, when she checked the girl's homework, it was in Spanish. Rosa began to wonder why the program was called "bilingual." The principal had promised Rosa that the amount of English in the lessons would increase, but there was no sign of that happening.

And it never did. It wasn't until the family moved 20 miles south to Cupertino, a Silicon Valley suburb on the edge of San Jose, that Angelica got any English education. Then she had to have a lot of it. "Your daughter isn't reading anywhere near a third-grade level," the teacher told Rosa. "And she's behind in math and science, too." But Cupertino (fortunately, as far as Rosa was concerned) had no bilingual program. So Angelica stayed in the class, though all year she had to take special after-school English lessons with newly arrived Chinese immigrant children.

This is what bilingual education did for my daughter, Rosa thought bitterly. It stole two years out of her life.

It was a hard fight, but Angelica won them back. Nobody in the house likes to recall that ugly year she spent in the third grade, but when it was over, she had caught up to the other kids. And as the years passed, her mother and father started catching up, too, to those immigrant dreams that, for a time, had faded into the distance. They became U.S. citizens. Carlos went to school, got a job as a graphic designer. Rosa stopped babysitting and started cleaning houses, which paid better. Her English blossomed. She began taking accounting courses at a community college. Two more babies arrived: Nathan and Joshua.

Nathan entered school without incident. But in 1996, when Joshua was ready for the first grade, school administrators called Rosa. They were starting this new bilingual program, and . . .

As they talked, Rosa flashed back to that conversation nine years before, when a shy, frightened babysitter with a Peruvian passport let a bunch of school administrators overrule her common sense. She recalled the price her daughter paid. And she said: “No way.”

Rosa Torres isn't alone. Bilingual education was born 30 years ago from a good-hearted but vague impulse by Congress to help Spanish speakers learn English. Instead, it has become a multi-billion-dollar hog trough that feeds arrogant education bureaucrats and militant Hispanic separatists. And now poor immigrant parents increasingly see it as the wall around a linguistic ghetto from which their children must escape if they want to be anything more than maids or dishwashers. Like Rosa Torres, they are starting to say “no way”:

- At 9th Street Elementary School in Los Angeles, located on the edge of the city's garment district, parents held about 90 children out of class for two weeks to force the school to start teaching English. “The only time they spoke English at the school was during lunch and recess,” said Luisa Hernandez, a sweatshop worker from Mexico whose nine-year-old daughter Yanira attends the school. “I want my daughter to learn English. All the exams for things like lawyers and doctors are in English. Without English, she would have to take a job like mine.”
- One hundred fifty Hispanic families in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood sued the state of New York to force the release of their children from a bilingual program. Ada Jimenez, one of the plain-

tiffs, said her grandson spoke only English when he entered the Bushwick school system. “We were told that because my grandson has a Spanish last name, he should remain in bilingual classes,” she said. Result: He flunked kindergarten. “He is now in seventh grade and cannot read in either English or Spanish,” Jimenez said in an affidavit for the lawsuit.

Denver is considering a change that would limit students to three years in its bilingual program instead of the six that many of them have been staying. Leading the charge is school board member Rita Montero, who originally championed bilingual education—until her own son was enrolled. “The kids were doing work way below the regular grade level,” she said. “I was furious.” She yanked him from the program and enrolled him in another school across town: “I had to think, what is more important to me? To keep my child in a program where perhaps he’ll learn some Spanish and that’ll make me happy? Or do I want my child to be able to come out of public education with the ability to compete for scholarships, to be able to go to the college of his choice?”

An October 1997 poll by the *Los Angeles Times* showed that California voters favored a proposed ballot measure to limit bilingual education by an astonishing 4–1 margin. The support was greatest among Hispanics: 84 percent. “Wake up call for *los Maestros* . . . If you are into Bilingual Ed. your days are numbered,” the bilingual paper San Diego *La Prensa* warned teachers. “We, *los Chicanos*, are responsible for putting you in . . . and you betrayed us. Bilingual Ed. has been turned into a full employment program for your own agenda that has nothing to do with our kids . . . that’s why 84% of *la gente en Los Angeles* voted against you . . . YOU BLEW THE PROGRAM.”

In Los Lunas, New Mexico, high school students walked out to protest the lack of English tutoring. In Dearborn, Michigan, the school board junked a proposal for \$5 million in federal money to begin a bilingual program after parents complained. In Princeton, New Jersey, immigrant parents raised so much hell about rules that made it difficult to get their children out of bilingual programs that the state legislature stepped in to change them.

Though usually poorly organized and often relatively powerless—they often aren’t U.S. citizens and sometimes aren’t even legal residents—the parents are starting to make themselves heard. Michigan has adopted reforms in its bilingual programs. Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, did away with

its bilingual program altogether. So did Orange County and three smaller school districts in California. In November, when Orange County voters were asked what they thought of the change, a crushing 86 percent approved.

An even bigger blow may be on the way in California, where voters in 1998 will consider a ballot initiative making bilingual education optional. Under the “English for the Children” initiative, non-English-speaking children would normally be placed in a short-term “structured immersion” program; parents could, however, apply for a waiver to have their children instead placed or kept in a bilingual or English-only program. If it wins the sweeping victory that current polls predict, the proposition is bound to turn bilingual education into a hot-button issue around the rest of the country—just as previous California ballot initiatives on property taxes and affirmative action have started dominoes tumbling. At press time, it was unknown whether the initiative would be on the ballot in June or November.

The proposition is the brainchild of Silicon Valley millionaire Ron Unz, who got the idea from reading newspaper stories about the boycott of 9th Street Elementary in Los Angeles. Unz had long been skeptical about bilingual education, but it was only after speaking with some of the 9th Street Elementary parents that he realized how deep the discontent ran in California’s Hispanic community.

“Immigrant parents always understood how damaging this was to their children,” he says, “but it was hard for them to make their voices heard.” Unz, a one-time Republican gubernatorial candidate, had the political and financial clout to turn up the volume. And as a longtime supporter of immigration—he was one of a tiny handful of Republican politicians to publicly oppose California’s anti-immigrant Proposition 187 three years ago—he was immune to the inevitable charges of racism from bilingual advocates. Assembling a campaign around a nucleus of anti-bilingual Hispanic teachers (including Jaime Escalante, the math teacher whose success in East Los Angeles inspired the film *Stand and Deliver*), Unz has turned bilingual education into California’s top political issue.

But the bilingual forces won’t yield without a fight, certainly not to mere parents. When those buttinsky parents in Princeton were demanding the right to put their kids in English-speaking classrooms, Joseph Ramos, the co-chairman of the New Jersey Bilingual Council, advised the school board to tell them to mind their own business. “Why would

we require parents unfamiliar with our educational system to make such monumental decisions,” he asked, “when we as bilingual educators . . . are trained to make those decisions?” *We know better, we’re the teachers.*

Some years ago, a newspaper sent me to interview S.I. Hayakawa, by then a retired senator from California. Hayakawa was legendarily combative: Asked once during a campaign stop what he thought about a local referendum on legalizing greyhound tracks, he snapped: “I’m running for the U.S. Senate. I don’t give a good goddamn about dog racing.” When I spoke with him, he had recently lashed out at bilingual education. It seemed paradoxical, to say the very least: Hayakawa was a native of Canada whose parents were born in Japan; he grew up speaking Japanese. He had authored a widely used book on linguistics. “Senator,” I began the interview, “why are you against people learning to speak two languages?” He looked at me as though I were daft. “Who said anything about that?” he demanded. “Only an idiot would be against speaking two languages. I’m against *bilingual education.*”

That’s still the biggest misconception among people who’ve never had a personal brush with bilingual education. It is *not* a program where two sets of children learn one another’s language at the same time. That’s called dual, or two-way, immersion. Only a few well-heeled school districts can afford to offer it, always as an elective, and the only complaint about it is that there usually aren’t enough slots to go around. Another thing bilingual education is not is a program conducted mostly in English, where the teacher occasionally translates a particularly difficult concept, or offers extra language help to children with limited English skills. Known variously as English as a Second Language, sheltered English, or structured English *immersion*, these are all wrinkles in a technique that educators call immersion, because the students are expected to wade into English quickly.

As Hayakawa explained to me that day, when educators use the term *bilingual education*, it’s shorthand for “transitional bilingual education,” which is the other major technique for teaching languages. TBE, as it is often called, was originally structured around the idea that students would take the main curriculum in their native language while they learned English, so that they wouldn’t fall behind in other subjects. But over the past two decades or so, most school districts have reshaped their TBE programs to reflect the ideas of the so-called “facilitation” theorists of language education. The facilitation theorists believe that children cannot effectively learn a second language until they are fully

literate in the first one, a process that can take four to seven years. (A new study from TBE advocates at the University of California at Riverside ups the ante to 10 years.)

During that time, a TBE student is supposed to be taught almost entirely in his native language, by a teacher fluent in that language, using books and films and tapes in that language. Gradually increasing bits of English are worked into the mix. At some point—bingo!—the child hits his “threshold” in the first language. Now he’s ready to suck up English like a human vacuum cleaner.

The idea that a kid will learn English by being taught in Spanish does not usually strike people outside the education field as very plausible—“*loco, completamente loco*” was the reaction of Luisa Hernandez when the principal at 9th Street Elementary in Los Angeles explained it to her—but the theory is so inculcated in many teachers that they rarely question it. When they do, it can be a shattering experience. Rosalie Pedalino Porter, director of the Research in English Acquisition and Development Institute, taught Spanish bilingual classes in kindergarten and elementary school for five years in Springfield, Massachusetts. As a six-year-old kid right off the boat from Sicily, Porter had done just fine without TBE, but education school had filled her with missionary zeal for the theory. She vividly remembers the day that she began to wonder if the bilingual god had failed.

It was a lesson in colors. “*Juan, que color es este?*” Porter asked one little boy, waving a box in her hand.

“Green,” he replied.

“*Verde,*” she corrected with the Spanish word.

“Green,” Juan repeated.

“*Verde,*” Porter corrected him again.

“Green,” Juan answered again.

What in the hell am I doing? Porter wondered to herself. *Why am I telling him not to speak English?* Pretty soon, once her classroom door was closed, Porter was giving lessons in English. “I wasn’t the only one, either,” she says.

It seems certain that, on the day in 1967 that he introduced the first piece of bilingual-education legislation, Ralph Yarborough had no idea his handiwork would one day lead to the concept of English teacher as guerrilla warrior. Yarborough was a liberal senator from Texas who was disturbed about the high dropout rate among Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans, which by some accounts ran as high as 40 percent. Yarborough asked for a paltry \$7.5 million to set up some programs

“not to stamp out the mother tongue and not to try to make their mother tongue the dominant language, but just to try to make those children fully literate in English.”

In those twilight days of the Great Society, the Bilingual Education Amendment passed easily, triggering no alarms. Yarborough always said he didn't know and didn't much care what method was used to teach the kids. The concept of TBE didn't exist, and it would be another decade before facilitation theory came slithering out of the primordial linguistic ooze.

Yet, in retrospect, the warning signs were there. Hispanic activists flocked to testify for the bill, and very few of them said anything about learning English. Instead, they argued that the high dropout rate was due to the fact that Hispanic kids had low self-esteem because they weren't being taught in their native language (“or their parents' native language,” as NYU historian Diane Ravitch acidly noted later).

And one witness, after suggesting that children might get some of their lessons in Spanish, admitted: “The Spanish-speaking parent is going to be opposed to this in many cases. Just last night at a little barbecue, we were talking about this bill . . . and one fellow said, ‘Well, my wife doesn't want any of this for her children.’ I should explain that this was a group of—all of us were Spanish-speaking, and we were speaking Spanish at the time. . . . These people were afraid of the bill or what it might do because they felt it would slow their children down in learning English. I want to say to them that there is nothing to fear.”

But there was. Militant Chicano activists immediately began demanding that the money from Yarborough's bill bankroll Spanish-language instruction. Within three years, what was then the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare was issuing guidelines making bilingual programs compulsory for school districts. In 1974, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lau v. Nichols* that non-English-speaking children (in this case, a Chinese student in San Francisco) had the right to special language programs. The next year HEW said that meant bilingual programs, period—and not just for kids who couldn't speak English. Now bilingual education was expanded to include any child from a home where English wasn't the primary language. Even a kid who spoke like an Oxford don was headed for bilingual classes if his parents preferred Spanish or Chinese. By 1980, HEW had bludgeoned 500 school districts nationwide into creating bilingual programs, with more on the way.

All this had happened without a scrap of evidence that bilingual education worked at all, much less that it was the best way to teach language. Then, in the late 1970s, facilitation theory was born. Its foundation was a 1976 study of two groups of children who migrated from Finland to Sweden, one before entering the third grade, one after. The study found that the children who emigrated after the third grade—whose Finnish language skills would presumably be more developed—performed better in Swedish than the children who came earlier.

But there are two major problems with the study. One is that its statistics have come under ferocious attack from other researchers. The second is that the study neglected to mention that Swedish is the second official language of Finland and is taught in Finnish schools beginning in the third grade. So the older students had already been studying their “new” language when they arrived in Sweden, in some cases for several years.

“I visited Finland a few years ago and talked to linguists there, and nobody could believe we take that study seriously in the United States,” says Rosalie Pedalino Porter. “They thought it was comical—the study has been discredited there for years.”

No matter. Here, it gave rise to facilitation theory, which in turn gave a patina of intellectual respectability not only to bilingual education but to gringo bashing. The writings of Canadian linguist Jim Cummins, one of the big academic guns of facilitation theory, are studded with denunciations of “coercive relations of power” created by a “curriculum that reflects only the experience and values of white middle-class English-speaking students.” If you doubt him, you surely are among the ranks of the “intellectual xenophobes” or “cultural hegemonists.”

What Cummins and other TBE advocates don’t like to admit is that they turn a blind eye to a multitude of acts of intellectual xenophobia and cultural hegemony *every day* in schools with bilingual curriculums. Here’s one of the dirty little secrets of TBE: It’s just for Spanish speakers. “When you talk about bilingual education, people will get absolutely hysterical over how kids will be cognitively deprived if they’re not taught in their native tongue,” says Christine Rossell, a political science professor at Boston University who has observed hundreds of classrooms in her research on bilingual education. “And yet, thousands and thousands of children are not taught in their native tongue every day, and no one cares. Polish kids don’t get taught in their native tongue. Vietnamese kids don’t get taught in their native tongue. Russian kids don’t, and Greek kids don’t. Even though all these principles of

bilingual education are supposedly universal, bilingual education is basically just Spanish, and no one seems to notice. I figure it's some kind of mass delusion. That's the only way you can explain it."

There are some true TBE classes in other languages. More often, though, a class labeled TBE in anything but Spanish will include at most a token nod to the native language. Doug Lasken, who teaches at Ramona Elementary School in Los Angeles, for a time presided over what was supposedly a TBE class for second- and third-grade Armenian-speaking children. "I certainly don't speak a word of Armenian, and never told anyone I did," Lasken remembers. "It was mysterious. I wondered what I was doing there sometimes. But it was a fun class, with great kids, and we spoke English. They had learned it all by themselves, without any special help at all." About the only hint of TBE in the classroom was some battered turn-of-the-century Armenian textbooks that were rarely opened.

One reason other languages have been discreetly pitched overboard is that any attempt to supply TBE for everyone who theoretically needs it would bankrupt the country before lunch. Schools in the state of New York include kids who speak 121 different languages. In the city of Seattle, 76. In Alexandria Avenue Elementary School in Los Angeles, 19—including Tagalog, Lao, Twi, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, and Sinhalese. For each of these languages, a full curriculum would have to be planned, textbooks would have to be purchased, and certified teachers would have to be hired. It is a prospect that daunts even the most madcap tax-and-spend liberal.

But even if we invaded Saudi Arabia and seized all its oil to fund full-service TBE, we couldn't provide it. The teachers simply don't exist. When California's Little Hoover Commission, Sacramento's version of the General Accounting Office, investigated bilingual education in 1993, it discovered a statewide shortage of 20,000 teachers. Even among Spanish-speaking teachers, in by far the most plentiful supply, there was a 60 percent shortfall. When it came to Romanian, Farsi, Pashto, and Lahu, forget it. Of course, if anyone had applied for all those empty jobs, there was no way for California to evaluate their competence; the state had teacher certification tests for only nine of the dozens of languages spoken by its schoolchildren.

Some languages simply can't be taught at all in TBE, because they have no written forms. (Remember, the whole point is that students must not merely *speak* their native language but *read and write* it well before they

move on to English.) That has not stopped the educrats from trying. In Massachusetts, school officials actually created an alphabet so that Kriolu—an obscure spoken-only dialect of Portuguese used in parts of the Cape Verde Islands—could be written for the first time. Textbooks and a curriculum followed, and now Massachusetts boasts the only schools in the entire world where classes are taught in Kriolu. (The unenlightened schools of the Cape Verde Islands continue to teach in Portuguese.) Massachusetts even sends home report cards and school bulletins in Kriolu. The parents have no idea whatsoever what this stuff says—none of them can read Kriolu—but their opinion hardly matters, does it? *We know better, we're the teachers.*

It is tempting to label the Kriolu classrooms as the all-time most harebrained product of bilingual education, but in considering TBE, caution is always advised; this is a field lush with opportunities for stupidity. A better choice may be experiments during the 1970s in New York City and Laredo, Texas, where teachers were trained to speak “Spanglish” (“Hey, Maria, *vamos por el cine* Orpheum, they’re having a festival *de películas de directores de Cuba* tonight”), supposedly the native language of local schoolchildren. Furious Puerto Rican parents snuffed the idea before it got anywhere in New York, but the Laredo program is still cited in bilingual literature as “the concurrent approach.”

Here’s another crazy aunt locked away in the bilingual attic: TBE administrators ruthlessly and routinely shanghai English-speaking kids into the program. What happened to Rosa Torres’s daughter Angelica is by no means uncommon, and it is far from the most extreme example. Nor is it something that only happens to the children of easy-to-bully new immigrants.

Exhibit A: Seven-year-old Tony, a third-generation American who speaks English like a kid who grew up in Ames, Iowa, or Manhattan, Kansas. Favorite TV show: *Sesame Street*. A member of the Children’s Book of the Month Club. And here’s the acid test: A recent visitor to Tony’s home heard him playing by himself in his bedroom, barking English commands to his GI Joes. In other words, there’s no earthly reason for Tony to be in a TBE class.

But Tony doesn’t live in Iowa or Kansas. And to the officials in his school district in the Southern California city of Hawthorne, there was only one relevant factor: his last name, Velasquez. When he started first grade in 1995, they put him in TBE. The school did notify his mother Ericka, who offered no objection. She heard the word *bilingual* and fig-

ured it meant he was in a class where he would study both Spanish and English. Ericka and her husband speak both languages and wanted to make sure Tony did, too. But after a few weeks, she began to have doubts.

“All his spelling words, every day, were in Spanish,” Ericka recalls. “I began to wonder, is this really bilingual? Or is it just Spanish?” Finally she paid a visit to the school, where she discovered Tony’s class spent just a few minutes a day on English. “I want him out of here,” she told the teacher. Nonetheless, it took an entire year of skirmishing before he moved to an English classroom. “I was so mad,” Ericka says, brow knitting as she thinks about it. “All that time wasted! He was so confused—why was he in Spanish classes when he knew English? He wants to be in English like the other kids. . . . Now, for the first time, he likes doing his schoolwork.”

What still makes her sad is remembering the immigrant children from El Salvador and Nicaragua who stayed behind when Tony left his TBE classroom. “These kids come from other countries, and I don’t know how they’re going to learn English if they keep feeding them the language of their native countries,” Ericka says. “But they’re stuck there. I’m an American, I know the ropes, and it still took me a year to get Tony out. Those kids’ parents will never be able to do it.”

The idea that those children must be taught in Spanish is ludicrous to Ericka. The daughter of a Nicaraguan immigrant, as a child she never heard English in her own home and spoke none at all when she started school. Yet she speaks it perfectly now, in the stop-and-go cadences (though not the loopy vocabulary) of the Valley Girls who shared her all-English classroom. “If children can’t learn English without a special program,” she wonders, “how do you explain me?”

School systems shunt kids into TBE all the time strictly on the basis of a Hispanic name. When Linda Chavez was director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, she was amazed to discover that the Washington, D.C., schools had placed her son Pablo in a TBE class—despite the fact that he didn’t speak a word of Spanish.

But even school systems that pretend to use more sophisticated techniques for evaluating students often misroute English speakers into foreign-tongue classrooms. Typically, the district conducts a “home language survey” of new students to determine which ones come from a non-English-speaking background, then uses a standardized achievement test to zero in on kids who will be placed in TBE.

Home language surveys, however, are hopelessly broad. They typically ask if *anyone* in the home speaks another language, a fatal flaw

when dealing with immigrant households that often include three generations with widely varying language patterns. If Grandma was already 60 when she came to the United States from Saigon or Havana and never learned to speak English, little Tuyen or Rodrigo has to take the test, regardless of the fact that he speaks *nothing* but English.

Nor will the tests necessarily save them. Most school districts will designate any child who scores below a certain percentile—generally somewhere between the 30th and 40th—as “limited-English proficient” and whisk them off to TBE classes. The godawful fallacies in such an approach are obvious to anyone without an advanced degree in education:

- The achievement test shows only the student’s attainment in English, not in the other language. So a kid who scores 29 goes into TBE even if he doesn’t speak a word of Spanish.
- The achievement test does nothing to identify the *reason* for the low score. A child who scores 25 may indeed need help with his English; or he may just need remedial education, period. There’s no way to tell from the test score itself.
- Last and certainly not least, 40 percent of the children taking an achievement test will *always*, by definition, score in the lowest 40th percentile. And it doesn’t necessarily say anything about whether they know enough English to understand history or math lessons.

“These tests are designed to break the students who take them into 100 categories and rank them,” says Boston University’s Rossell, who has written extensively on the testing issue. “They don’t include anything at all about basic English communication skills, because they’re designed for English-speaking students who for the most part have those skills.” As critical as she is of the achievement tests, which are given to older children, Rossell actually shudders when she talks about the oral tests given to incoming kindergarten and first-grade students.

“I have a professor friend whose kid was given an English oral proficiency test because he had a Hispanic name,” she said. “The kid tested as limited-English proficient even though he didn’t know any language besides English. But he’s kind of an odd kid, just wouldn’t answer some of the questions, and acted bored. That’s not exactly uncommon with five-year-olds. They may not feel confident enough to answer questions asked by a stranger, or they may just not feel like talking at all at that moment.”

The failures of standardized tests are much more than theoretical. When the U.S. Department of Education investigated federally funded bilingual programs in Texas in 1982, it found 90 percent of the students designated limited-English proficient actually spoke better English than Spanish. A 1980 study of several California school districts showed only about half the Hispanic limited-English proficient students spoke better Spanish than English; 40 percent spoke no Spanish at all.

Attempts to develop language aptitude tests that would do a better job of identifying TBE candidates haven't met with much success. As an experiment, one such test was given to Chicago students who spoke English only and were above-average readers. Almost half of them wound up classified as non- or limited-English-speaking. A later experiment with English-only Cherokee Indian students had nearly identical results.

The victims of testing malpractice, by the way, are almost always kids from poor families. "There's a ton of research showing that students from economically disadvantaged households score lower than the rest of the population on standardized tests," says Rossell. Yet the church and civil rights groups who would undoubtedly be in a blood frenzy if these tests were being used against poor kids for virtually any other purpose are curiously quiet about TBE.

On the other hand, maybe it's not curious at all. For they didn't say anything, either, when the *San Francisco Examiner* discovered that more than 750 black students had been arbitrarily dumped into the city's Spanish or Chinese classrooms to fulfill school district integration policies. (The *Examiner* also found 325 children who used something besides English at home were put in Spanish or Chinese TBE classes on the grounds that they needed bilingual education, even if it was in a language they didn't speak.) One elementary school principal candidly admitted that he knew he was supposed to ask parents before transferring students into TBE, but never did. "If I went and asked everybody," he explained, "I'd get too many no's." *We know better, we're the teachers.*

The *Examiner* story ran in 1991, but the practice continues. "I meet with black parents all the time whose kids have gotten trapped in this thing," says attorney Cynthia McClain-Hill, who has squared off with the Los Angeles schools several times. "I can tell you this is a smoldering volcano in the African-American community."

Some of TBE's shortcomings might be argued away, or at least choked down, if bilingual education actually worked. But it doesn't. "When this all started out, we didn't know anything, so we adopted bilingual education on

a leap of faith,” says Rosalie Pedalino Porter of the Research in English Acquisition and Development Institute. “Thirty years later, we know better. The effects have been almost uniformly negative.”

Sifting through social science research is always tricky for a layman; there are so many studies, their methodologies obscured in thick layers of jargon, their outcomes in impenetrable mathematics. Fortunately, when it comes to bilingual education, someone has done the academic grunt work for us. Christine Rossell and her research partner Keith Baker, who directed several studies of bilingual education for the U.S. Department of Education, sifted through scientific evaluations of 300 bilingual programs. Their first conclusion: Most of the research was just plain rotten. “It’s as bad as the dueling psychologists you see in criminal courtrooms,” Rossell says. Of the 300 evaluations, Rossell and Baker found only 72 that were methodologically sound.

Then they compiled a scorecard based on the results. The outcome was devastating for TBE. In head-to-head comparisons with the various versions of immersion teaching on reading, grammar, and math, TBE lost every time. That is, there were always more studies showing immersion therapy produced superior results. Often, lots more. For instance, 83 percent of the studies comparing TBE to “structured immersion” teaching (essentially, using simple English) showed kids learned to read better in the structured immersion classes; not a single one showed TBE to be superior.

Perhaps the single most calamitous statistic was in the comparison between TBE and *doing nothing at all*. An amazing 64 percent of the studies found kids learned grammar better in sink-or-swim classes without any special features whatsoever than they did in TBE. Many critics have seized on another way of evaluating TBE’s results: the length of time it takes students to “graduate” into mainstream classes. Many school districts don’t even compile those statistics—do they fear the results, or do they just not care? and which is worse?—but where they’re available, the numbers are sad.

A 1994 study in New York City showed only about half the children who enter TBE in kindergarten have been mainstreamed within three years. For kids who enter in the second grade, the number drops to 22 percent. And in the sixth grade, just 7 percent. By contrast, 80 percent of students who enter immersion programs in kindergarten, 68 percent

of those who enter in the second grade, and 33 percent of those who enter in the sixth grade are mainstreamed within three years.

A 1985 report on TBE in Boston showed more than half the TBE students in high school or middle school had been in the program six years or more. Across the country in Seattle, a 1993 study showed the annual exit rate from TBE was 10.6 percent. In California, it's less than 6 percent. These rates are low even according to TBE theory, which says kids should be ready for English classes in four to seven years. Not everyone agrees that exit rates are terribly significant. "Transition out of TBE is a function of local politics and test scores on very unreliable tests, not whether or not you know English," says Rossell. "The reality is that teachers inside the program are cheating, teaching English even though they're not supposed to. So the good news is that bilingual education is not as harmful as people think."

Try arguing that point to Alice Callaghan, who runs the Las Familias del Pueblo family center in the Los Angeles garment district, and she has an easy comeback. It's a paper written by one of the little boys who comes to her center each day after school, a veteran of six years of TBE: "*I my parens per mi in dis shool en I so I feol essayrin too old in the shool my border o veri can grier das mony putni gire and I sisairin aliro sceer.*"

"The school district says this boy is doing very well and he's nearly ready to leave bilingual classes," says Callaghan, shaking her head. "As far as I'm concerned, that says it all."

It was at Callaghan's center that the boycott of 9th Street Elementary was conceived. For an entire year, the immigrant parents of the kids in her after-school program had been trying to meet with administrators at the school to ask for more English in the curriculum. No thanks, said the school officials. *We know better, we're the teachers.*

The parents gathered at the center to try to figure out their next step and asked Callaghan for some suggestions. Well, she said, we could write letters to state officials. We could pass around a petition. We could boycott, pull the kids out of class until the school officials do what we're asking. We could—"Boycott! Boycott!" shouted one of the mothers, jumping out of her chair. "Let's do the boycott!"

"It was instantaneous," recalls Callaghan. "Everybody agreed. I was shocked, frankly. A lot of these people don't have legal papers. For them to do this, to call public attention to themselves, it shows you the frustration they were feeling. And they were right. Without the boycott, I

think we might as well have gone outside and talked to the tires on our cars. That's how much progress we were making."

School administrators reacted to the boycott like plantation overseers to a slave revolt, calling police out to try to break up the parents' picket line, then phoning them at the garment factories where they work to warn them that keeping their children out of school was illegal.

In the end, though, the bright light of publicity generated by the boycott caused the school officials to scuttle for the corners. They capitulated, though later some would hint darkly that the parents had somehow been duped and manipulated by Callaghan. It is a charge that puzzles the parents. "It was our idea, we were the ones who wanted to do it," says Juana Losara, a Mexican seamstress whose three children attend the school. "I knew my children needed help. I would hear somebody speaking English on the street or on TV, and I would say to the kids, 'What's he saying?' And they would all answer, 'I don't know.' They were born here, but they don't speak any English."

When Losara found out her children were spending less than an hour a day on English, she went to the school. "All the other American children are speaking English at this age," she told an official. "Why aren't mine?" The answer—be patient—was not good enough. "If they don't learn English at this age, at 9 or 10, they aren't going to speak it when they grow up," she said.

Losara knows how hard it is to learn English later: After 15 years in this country, she barely speaks a word. She knows the cost, too: "If I could get English, maybe I could get a job I like better. But the first question is always, 'Do you speak English?'" So, like her husband, she stays at the big sewing machines in the garment factories, toiling away for minimum wage.

Going back to Mexico, though, never crosses her mind. "I want to stay here," she says quietly. "I want my children to be something. My husband and I are nothing. But we're struggling so they can be something."

Perhaps the most telling argument of all against bilingual education is the high school dropout rate among Hispanic students: 30 percent, more than double that for blacks or whites. Those who have difficulty with English are far more likely to drop out. The message has gotten through to Hispanic parents. The *Los Angeles Times* poll showing their support for the anti-bilingual ballot proposition in California was hardly the first to reflect their skepticism about TBE. A 1996 survey of

Hispanic parents in Houston, San Antonio, Miami, New York, and Los Angeles showed that they regard teaching English as the single most important thing that schools do. Second: math, history, and other academic subjects. Spanish finished a distant third.

But Hispanic politicians and activists, wildly out of touch with their own communities, continue to wave the bloody bilingual flag. Characteristic is their reaction to the California proposition. Although the proposition would establish “sheltered English” or “structured immersion” as the educational norm in California, it would by no means make TBE illegal or force schools to do away with it. Any parents who want to place their children in TBE could do so by asking for a waiver.

You’d never know that, though, from the way opponents talk. “If we lose bilingual education in California today, we could easily lose it everywhere tomorrow,” warns Antonia Hernandez, president of the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund. Chimes in Rep. Xavier Becerra (D-Calif.), chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus: “Hopefully, our community will see this as another case of immigrant bashing and react.”

Even more hysterical has been the reaction of academicians. James Lyons, executive director of the National Association of Bilingual Education, recently predicted that without TBE, children would no longer be able to speak with their grandparents. “That isn’t what we want in America,” he implored.

Rosalie Pedrino Porter believes TBE’s champions will conduct a scorched-earth campaign in its defense, no matter what polls show about what parents really want. “It’s now wrapped up in politics—ethnic politics, victimhood, which of course gives you preferential status through affirmative action,” she says. “It’s wrapped up in money and power and control. Now we have a huge bureaucracy of administrators, bilingual psychologists, textbook publishers producing books in Spanish. Whether anybody wants to admit it or not, there’s a huge investment in keeping this going. The fact is you can’t make changes in this program very easily.”

The financial incentives to keep TBE on life support are considerable. Because the money is scattered across thousands of budgets at the state, local, and federal level, and often not plainly labeled, it’s difficult to come up with a reliable estimate of TBE’s costs, but they probably approach \$2 billion. In California, bilingual certification can mean up to \$5,000 extra a year for a teacher.

Even more important, though, may be the groupthink that afflicts TBE's chattering-class supporters. The integrationist impulse of the 1960s is dead. Liberal chic in the 1990s is segregation, dressed up as identity-group politics. It's embarrassing enough that immigrants believe in an American dream that liberals long ago declared mythical and absurd. But that they want to drag their children into it, too!

"A lot of my friends were just scandalized when I started saying I supported the anti-bilingual initiative," says Alice Callaghan. Callaghan, who describes herself as "a Teddy Kennedy liberal," had impeccably politically correct credentials until she got involved in the 9th Street Elementary boycott: An Episcopal priest who's spent 16 years working with sweatshop workers and their kids, she's the veteran of many a civil rights sit-in—even has an arrest record. But the price of supporting English education for the children at her center has been far higher than any she ever had to pay for opposing U.S. military adventures or its support for South Africa. Just for starters, the University of Southern California—a stronghold of TBE theory—has just canceled a \$238,000 grant to her center.

And her movement friends who still speak to her do so in tones of pity. "It must be tough being out there all alone," one said recently. "It's not so lonely," Callaghan replied. "There may not be any liberals out here with me, but there are plenty of the people that liberals say they want to help."

Still, there may be hope. People *do* change. Fernando Vega did. Vega, in a very real sense, is responsible for everything that happened to Rosa Torres, the Peruvian immigrant whose daughter got snarled up in Redwood City's TBE program. Fernando, you see, was the guy who got the Redwood City schools started down the bilingual path nearly three decades ago.

Not that he meant Rosa any harm. In fact, his story is, in many ways, similar to hers. Fernando is an American—born in Houston, he grew up right on the border in Brownsville, Texas—but his parents were Mexican immigrants. They spoke only Spanish, but Fernando's dad was a demon about learning English. Sometimes he would make the boy come out with him and lug backbreaking loads of shingles under that scorching Brownsville sun. "It's hot, no?" his father would ask after they'd been at it for a while. "Yes, Papa," Fernando would gasp. "Remember it, then," his father commanded. "And stay in school."

Fernando did, until World War II broke out. Then he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and learned to fix planes. After the war he got a job with

Pan Am. He was such a good mechanic that after a while, the airline asked him to train others. So in 1958 he left Brownsville for San Francisco. With his wife and six children, Fernando settled in Redwood City.

It was a small town in those days, without many Hispanics. But Fernando never had any trouble until his eldest son Oscar was ready for high school. Together the two of them sat down and planned the courses Oscar would need to go to college. Algebra, civics, biology. But when Oscar came home from his first day of school, he had a new schedule: general math, ceramics, and woodworking.

“This is not what I want for my son,” Fernando told the guidance counselor. “You never consulted me about these changes.”

“The courses you wanted for him are reserved for kids who are going to college,” the counselor explained. “And, let’s be realistic, Oscar isn’t going to college. But if he comes to these classes every day and behaves himself, he’ll get a diploma.”

“This school doesn’t belong to you!” Fernando growled. “I pay taxes for this place!” He stomped out. After some angry talk at a school board meeting, he got Oscar back into the college prep classes. But every time one of his children started high school, Fernando had to go through the whole damned thing again. After a while, other Hispanic parents were calling, asking for his help with their kids. He got to be so good at it that he was elected to his own seat on the school board.

It was around 1970, when Fernando was visiting one of the schools, that a teacher approached him. “Mr. Vega, you know we’re starting to get a lot of immigrants from Mexico here,” she said. “And some of the children don’t speak a word of English. I’ve got three in my class right now and I don’t know what to do with them. Is there any money we could use to hire some teachers’ aides who speak Spanish? Just to get them started.”

Fernando called the superintendent, who remembered getting a notice that there was some federal money available for a new program called bilingual education, taught partly in Spanish, partly in English. Fernando, bemused, gave it some thought. Back in Brownsville, he’d learned English sink-or-swim in the first grade, and things had worked pretty well—not just for Fernando, but for a lot of Mexican kids who were allowed to attend school on the American side of the border. One of them even became the valedictorian of his high school class.

On the other hand, you had to be open to new ways of doing things. When Fernando started out in the Army Air Corps, everybody carried a slide rule to calculate things like fuel consumption. But these days, all

the pilots and flight engineers carried little electronic calculators. That was progress. This bilingual education, it was progress too. “Let’s get some of that money,” he told the superintendent.

Fernando couldn’t believe how quickly things moved after that. They hired teachers, not aides, with the federal money—and because bilingual teachers were hard to come by, they accepted some who Fernando privately didn’t think were very good. But there wasn’t much he could do about it. They needed more bilingual teachers every year, because the program was getting huge—new waves of immigrants were pouring in, but none of the kids seemed to be moving over into English classes. It was all a little disquieting, but before it reached the point of alarm, Fernando left the school board. His kids had all graduated, and it was time to do something new. He won a seat on the city council, then became an official in the state Democratic Party, finally a national organizer. The problems of Redwood City’s schools were a distant memory.

Until the day in 1988 that Oscar stopped by the house. Fernando’s eldest son now had a little boy of his own, Jason, who just two weeks ago had started the first grade. Funny thing, though—his class was taught in Spanish, a language the child didn’t know. When Oscar went over to the school to ask that Jason be moved into an English classroom, the principal said there weren’t any.

“Besides, he needs to learn Spanish,” the principal added. “It’s a shame he doesn’t know his native language.”

“English is his native language,” Oscar retorted. “He’s an American. He’s never even been to Mexico.” The principal just shrugged.

“What am I going to do, Dad?” Oscar asked after he’d told the story. “They won’t listen to me at all.”

Fernando didn’t answer for a minute. He was still marveling at the insane mutation of a small act of kindness to some immigrant kids two decades earlier. He had gotten involved with the schools in the first place because they were trying to segregate his children under the guise of academic tracking. Now they were trying to do it again, to his grandchildren, under the guise of language instruction.

Finally he spoke. “I guess you’re going to have to do what I did, when they wouldn’t listen to me about your classes,” he counseled Oscar. “You’re going to have to run for the school board.”

Oscar did. He won—it turned out that a lot of Redwood City parents had been hoping someone would voice their discontent about TBE—and though it took some time, he helped rein in the program’s worst excesses.

Now, at 73, Fernando is mostly retired from politics. But last fall, when he heard about the California ballot proposition that would cut back TBE, he stopped by one of the campaign offices to find out what it was all about. Impressed at the explanation, he took home some signs bearing the proposition's slogan, "English for the Children," in both English and Spanish. He stuck them in his front lawn.

That evening, the doorbell rang. "Excuse me, mister," a woman—a Salvadoran, by the sound of her Spanish—asked when Fernando answered. "I saw your sign. Do you teach English here? My children need to learn it."

"I'm sorry, the sign is about something else," Fernando replied. "But why do you need an English teacher? Don't your children go to school?"

"Of course they do," the woman replied sadly. "But at the school, they only teach Spanish."

Defining Disability Down

Why Johnny Can't Read, Write, or Sit Still

Ruth Shalit

This selection first appeared in *The New Republic* on 25 August 1997. Ruth Shalit is a frequent contributor to *The New Republic* and other national publications.

In July of 1995, Jon Westling, the provost of Boston University, traveled to Australia to attend the Winter Conversazione on Culture and Society, a highbrow *tete-a-tete* for globetrotting pundits and savants. Westling, a protege of former B.U. President John Silber, is an avowed conservative; and the subtitle of his speech, "The Culture Wars Go to School," seemed to portend the usual helping of red meat for the faithful. But instead of decrying deconstruction, or puncturing the pretensions of tenured radicals, Westling took aim at an unexpected target—the learning-disabled. He told the story of a shy yet assertive undergrad, "Somnolent Samantha," who had approached him one day