

Cardinal Compositions

University of Louisville

Exploring Bilingual Student Experiences in American Education

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For the Classroom

- 1) Google the word “intersectionality.” Who coined this term? What can you find out about it? How might intersectionality shed light on some of Raymer’s research findings?
- 2) Look up Victoria Hinesly’s article, “The Effect of Bilingualism on Writing Ability” (cited in Raymer’s study). Like Raymer, Hinesly is an undergraduate student conducting primary research. How does Hinesly set up her study? In what ways do her methods differ from Raymer’s methods? Think of some questions you have about writing/reading, or writers/readers. After reading Raymer’s and Hinesly’s studies, how could you go about answering those questions?

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INTRODUCTION

“The myth of linguistic homogeneity – the assumption that college students are by default native speakers of a privileged variety of English – is seriously out of sync with the sociolinguistic reality of today’s U.S. higher education as well as of U.S. society at large” (Matsuda 315).

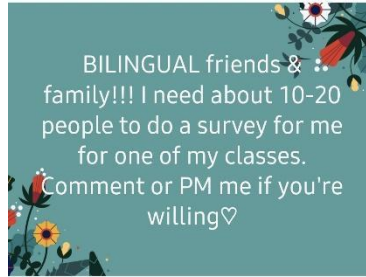
For as long as many of us can remember, we have known the United States to be referred to as “a melting pot.” It is regarded as a country where all languages, cultures, religions, lifestyles, and ethnicities can thrive and accomplish the American Dream. However, over recent decades it has become clear that America has failed in truly welcoming the “outsider” with open arms. The middle-class white American has been predominant for a long time, as shown by who wrote our Constitution, and academic English has developed as such. Standard American English is expected in academia, although it is no longer the majority language in many areas of our country. Bilingual students have become increasingly common in our American classrooms, and the question on my mind this semester has been: “What is it like to be bilingual in the American school system?”

Scholars have been tackling this concept through many applications, research studies, and academic articles, and it doesn’t take much searching to find opinions of what Standard American English “should” be and how it impacts students. A prevalent sentiment is that “correctness reinforces equality” (Pattanayak 86). Lower-income and minority students experience a unique lack of assistance in schooling overall, and this is even more of a concern with students who are bilingual and speak another language fluently. This can often be their first language or the language they speak predominantly with family. This concept of “dominant language ideology” – that “all writers and speakers of English must conform to” this “one set of dominant language rules” (111) – is scrutinized by Vershawn Young in his writing. To expand on this discussion, I set out to explore what impact bilingualism has on students’ experiences, what support they receive, and whether there is any correlation between the type of school they attended and their feelings toward their education. My goal was to answer these questions and compare my findings to what I have learned from other scholars in this area.

First, I’ll take you through my methods of study, where I’ll explain exactly how I distributed my survey and chose its questions. In the next section, I’ll go into detail over my findings and the implications therein. I’ll challenge you with some ideas for progressive change and conclude with some research suggestions to further discourse on this topic that is so meaningful in this current social and political climate.

METHODS

I decided to execute this research with a survey, knowing that I had a good mixture of potential respondents available on my primary social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. My initial outreach was done by posting on my Facebook timeline and Instagram story, asking anyone bilingual to contact me if they were open to completing a short survey. The post is illustrated below. I utilized one of the Facebook features for the decorated background in order to draw more attention to the reader’s eye and also to promote it within the Facebook algorithm.



I knew I wanted to get about 10 to 15 responses at a minimum. Throughout the first couple of days, I observed where the respondents were coming from. Six of my respondents came from this post on Facebook, five of them replied to the Instagram story, and two more came from referrals (where someone that reached out to me sent it to another person as well; in both cases, this person was their spouse. If I hadn't gotten this many respondents in the first two days, I would have expanded my initial reach by posting in a few larger groups I'm a part of on Facebook.

Although they were anonymous, I had a general idea of who was responding since I knew who had reached out to me to assist. I was a bit "lucky" to have a variety of demographics and languages represented. As an example, both my mom and my aunt saw my post and were willing to fill out the survey. They are first-generation here from Germany, so it gave me two perspectives from the later-age demographic that I wouldn't have access to quite as easily otherwise. Overall, it was a nice cross-section of lifestyles and backgrounds which was something I found to be positive. Even though this is a small sample size study, I still wanted to get a wide variety of perspectives.

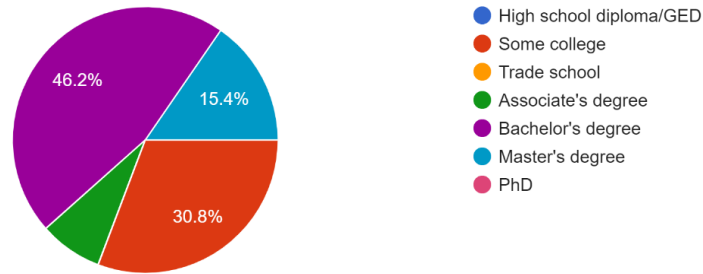
My questions needed to be simple enough that strangers would not give up on the survey, as I did not have a personal relationship with every person who completed the survey. I included a few demographic questions, some yes/no questions, and some short answers, as well. I wanted to get a great assortment of data without having to do actual interviews. It's safe to say I succeeded in this because I had some really fascinating responses, which set the stage for a very interesting analysis.

FINDINGS

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

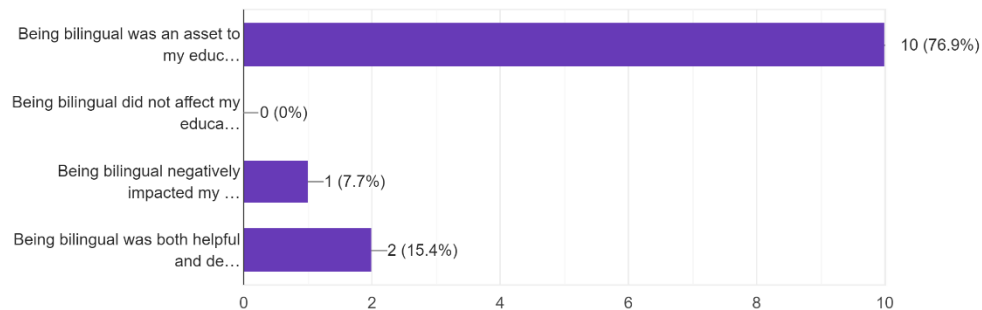
As I began to analyze the data, I was pleasantly surprised to find I had 13 responses to my survey. There were six diverse first languages other than English represented (German, Assyrian, Ukrainian, Spanish, Greek, Mandarin) and four additional languages of fluency (ASL, French, Malay, Russian). About half of the respondents were in the 19 to 29 age range (6 out of 13), but the other half were spread out across the other age ranges of 30 to 39 (3 respondents), 40 to 49 (2 respondents), and 60 to 69 (2 respondents). All of the respondents had at least some college experience, with 46% of them having a Bachelor's degree, and the majority went to public schools (77%). A map of the data is illustrated below.

What is the highest level of education you have completed?
13 responses



Just over half of them received some form of help in school (7 of the 13). Forms of help included ESL classes, reading and writing tutoring, and speech therapy. Interestingly enough, the majority said they did *not* have any negative experiences in schooling – 69% or 9 respondents of the 13. This all culminated in the majority of the respondents, specifically 76.9%, self-describing their bilingualism as an asset in their education. In addition, 15% said it was a mix of helpful and detrimental, and only one (7%) said it had a fully negative impact on her education. A map of the data is illustrated below.

Select the statement that describes you best. You may select as many options as you wish.
13 responses



RESPONDENT EXPERIENCES

Some quotes and experiences shared by respondents were rather poignant. Two that stuck out were from respondents #9 and #10. Respondent #9 is Deaf and experienced struggles with English vs. ASL. Many people without exposure to the Deaf community do not know that ASL is not simply visual signs of the English language. They may use English words, but the actual language differs in how it is visually presented and mentally processed. Their grammar is also not an identical copy of Standard American English grammar. The respondent shared that they had “teachers assume that because my vocabulary is good and my sentence structure is poor, that I was cheating.” A very problematic suggestion at one point in their education was to “read it aloud to myself to see if it made sense. Reading it aloud to myself doesn’t make sense because I’m Deaf and can’t hear.” This caught my attention because it seems so illogical to ask a Deaf child to read something to themselves out loud. They may use vastly different processes from a hearing student, and this should absolutely be considered in the education of Deaf students. There is no one-size-fits-all approach in education, no matter what. It is worth noting

that this respondent is also the only one who selected that bilingualism had a negative impact on their education.

Respondent #10 also shared two brief experiences that greatly impacted me. As a student whose first language was Assyrian, they struggled to learn English when put into the classroom setting. They said, “When in kindergarten I asked to use the bathroom but didn’t know how to say it in English. I remember so clearly her yelling, ‘We speak English here’ then I got in trouble for peeing my pants.” They continue to share another time their bilingualism was perceived as a negative thing, “In 3rd grade during a presentation (my first ever) I got nervous and started speaking a mix of Assyrian and English and got my first ever F on a project because of it.”

These two students had to learn to overcome not just learning a new language, but also negative attitudes from the educators in their lives who should have been coming alongside them to help them. Anjali Pattanayak challenges this detrimental mindset by stating, “It is deeply problematic that the impetus is still placed on minority students with non-standard dialects to adapt” (86). Both aforementioned respondents are minorities! They had to take on the burden themselves as minority bilingual students – and *also young children* – to learn the believed-to-be-proper ways of dealing with the English language. What is the responsibility of the teacher, if not to teach our children?

SUGGESTIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Many respondents, when asked how to better support bilingual students, shared thoughts and suggestions that reminded me of scholars such as Anjali Pattanayak, who I referenced in the last paragraph, as well as Vershawn Young. Young shares that “don’t nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them ‘vulnerable to prejudice.’ It’s ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language” (110). In a continuation of this concept, Pattanayak shares that “we effectively devalue the intelligence and character of students” (84) when we emphasize their limitations in the English language. A few respondents reiterated the concept of support and assistance in slightly different manners, as follows:

“Be patient. Some may be first-generation and need more help than others.” (Resp. #3)

“Just being nonjudgmental and helpful to them.” (Resp. #8)

“Make it known that... they should be proud to even be speaking both.” (Resp. #10)

It is important to note that every respondent did share at least one positive outcome from their bilingualism. I was surprised to see more than one mention of how bilingualism helped them in their English studies explicitly, which is the same conclusion that Victoria Hinesly came to in her study.

“I understood the Latin roots of words... it made learning other languages very easy.” (Resp. #2)

“...when taking a foreign language in high school it was easier for me since I already dealt with feminine and masculine endings for words.” (Resp. #11)

“Spanish taught me a lot about English and its rules actually.” (Resp. #4)

Hinesly specifically studied the impact of bilingualism on English writing skills. Her study looked directly at writing samples from four bilingual students, so the study’s methods and delivery were quite different from mine. However, I would assert that we came to an agreeable consensus. As Hinesly analyzed the ratings of the writing samples, they were “consistent with the hypothesis that grammar usage, ability to determine appropriate content, and command of language are indeed facilitated by bilingualism” (83).

What exactly does this tell us? While both of our studies have small sample sizes, (n=4 for Hinesly, and n=13 for mine) it is evident that bilingualism is helpful for the majority of these students in a plethora of ways. It helps them to learn other foreign languages as part of their school curriculums, it helps them with their command of the English language as a whole (as

shown by Hinesly), and it gives them opportunities for communication and travel that monolingual students don't have. The following are a few statements from respondents about ways that bilingualism was an asset for them:

"Not only do I continue to practice the language but I use it to educate others [in my career]." (Resp. #3)

"I live in America. So it is very helpful to speak English. But I keep contacts in Greece for work and family so Greek is helpful to know and understand." (Resp. #5)

"More job opportunities." (Resp. #6)

"Being tri-lingual helped me in my ELA classes as well as allowed me to study abroad in college as I was fluent in the needed language." (Resp. #7)

"Being able to speak and write Mandarin helps me to communicate with Chinese. Being able to speak and write English helps me to further my education in the UK." (Resp #12)

RELEVANT CHALLENGES

To further this conversation, I'd like to bring in quotes from one more scholar, Paul Matsuda. As mentioned earlier, Respondents #9 and #10 were essentially told to fix their language issues when struggling with English at a young age. Rather than showing compassion for a confused five-year-old, #10's kindergarten teacher chose to reinforce that English was RIGHT. There was no alternative, no searching in the moment for a way to communicate basic words or gestures to figure out what #10 needed. And instead of taking the opportunity to work closely with #9 to sound out their words to help them see errors and learn proper phrasing or grammar, #9's teacher chose to suggest they do something physically impossible. Whether they were ignorantly assuming able-bodiedness, or just willfully ignoring the students' need for help, we will never know.

"It is not unusual for teachers who are overwhelmed by the presence of language differences to tell students simply to 'proofread more carefully' or to 'go to the writing center'; those who are not native speakers of dominant varieties of English are thus being held accountable for what is not being taught." (Matsuda, 2018)

This continues the idea shared before from Pattanayak. The non-native speakers – in this case, the young children or high school students – are not the ones who should bear this burden, yet they often do! Teachers and educators must come alongside their students and approach them with humility. They simply cannot just tell the student that they need to speak English or should try to read their own work aloud. Doing this in the formative years will produce college students or young professionals who struggle immensely in ways that they could have been better prepared for. Even if the ratio from my small study holds true – 3 out of 13 experience at least some negative impact from bilingualism – this could still indicate that many students are attempting to cope with unfavorable conditions in their education.

There is also a disproportionate impact of this concept on minority and lower-income students. For so long, there has been a priority for Standard American [read: WHITE-SOUNDING] English to be the academic standard. It has been part of the system that has put already-struggling students at even more of a disadvantage for decades and decades. This is something Young delves into at a deeper level in his paper and many other scholars have joined that important conversation.

As I approached my final question regarding correlations in types of school and contentedness of the students, I found that all three of the students who reported some level of negativity associated with their bilingualism had different schooling paths. One went to public school, one went to private school, and one went to a combination of the above. This implies that the problems do stretch across all types of schooling, and I would argue are more closely tied to the ATTITUDES (as Young would say) of particular teachers and educational professionals, rather than the system as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Educators should consider these findings in their approach to bilingual students. What is your ultimate goal or intent in how you teach? Hinesly brings this to our attention in her study:

“Is the intent to make students bilingual (fluent in both their native language and English), or is it to make sure that English learners master the language as rapidly as possible?” (79)

I argue that the goal of the educational system should always be to enhance and edify learners in any and every way possible. This would mean acknowledging your role in allowing the bilingual student to feel safe with you while adjusting to the English language over time.

Ultimately, this project aimed to contribute to the body of research on bilingualism and student writing. My initial goal was to gain an understanding of what bilingual students experience, across age ranges, schooling types, and education levels. It seems that even in such a small representation of the bilingual culture, we have work to do. One thing that has been made clear to me throughout all of this reading and research is that we have a long way to go within the American educational system to make all students feel supported and welcomed, regardless of their innate command of the English language.

The results I found clearly demonstrate that while most bilingual students find being bilingual an asset to them overall, there are still many who experience difficulty or negativity within their educational years. This leaves much to be discussed as we consider the gravity of what this data means for current and future students. Future studies should obtain a much larger sample size to gain more empirical data to analyze. Is the race or gender identity of the bilingual student an additional factor that can be compared and contrasted? What needs to change in the educational system across inner cities and areas with low educational funding? Is there an implicit bias that can be proven in certain areas of the United States, and therefore pointedly repaired? Are there teaching strategies that can be consistently utilized with bilingual students to better support their learning? Answering these questions, while complex and time-consuming, could facilitate lasting and meaningful change within American academia. I hope that these questions and others can be addressed and resolved, as education is what opens the door for our future leaders and our society as a whole.

Works Cited

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APPENDIX
Bilingual Students' Experiences in Education

This survey is part of a research project for an English 102 class. The goal of this project is to learn about bilingual people's experiences in school. If you identify as someone who is functionally bilingual – able to speak and interact in two or more languages – you are eligible to complete this survey. Your survey responses will remain anonymous and will only be used for this research project.

1. What was your first language?
2. What languages are you functionally fluent in?
3. What is your age?
 - a. Under 18
 - b. 19-29
 - c. 30-39
 - d. 40-49
 - e. 50-59
 - f. 60-69
 - g. 70+
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. High school diploma/GED
 - b. Some college
 - c. Trade school
 - d. Associate's degree
 - e. Bachelor's degree
 - f. Master's degree
 - g. PhD
5. What kind of school did you attend for K-12?
 - a. Public school
 - b. Private school
 - c. Homeschool
 - d. Some combination of the above
6. Did you ever receive additional help in English/reading/writing, such as a specialized class group, tutor, teacher's aide, etc? (Y/N)
7. If you answered Yes to the previous question, what did that help look like?
8. Did you ever have a negative experience with a teacher, particularly in an English Arts/ reading/ writing environment? (Y/N)
9. If you answered Yes, please share about this experience.
10. Select the statement that describes you best.
 - a. Being bilingual was an asset to my educational experience.
 - b. Being bilingual did not affect my educational experience at all.
 - c. Being bilingual negatively impacted my educational experience.
 - d. Being bilingual was both helpful and detrimental to my educational experience.
11. Can you explain why you made the selection in the previous question?
12. Is there anything you think would be useful to help bilingual students feel more comfortable and supported in their schooling?