Bilingual education programmes: a straightforward decision?

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**Title:** Bilingual education programmes: a straightforward decision?.  
**Abstract**  
As a result of globalizataion, there has been a tendency in recent years to implement bilingual education programmes in educational institutions. This article considers that the decision should not be made lightly, as many factors, such as advantages, disadvantages, diversity of programmes available and specific context must be taken in to account. Unfortunately due to factors such as pressure from society in general, political propaganda or educational trends, this article considers that sometimes these decisions may not be given the importance that they are due, resulting in ineffective bilingual education programmes in schools.

**Keywords:** bilingual education, CLIL, multilingualism, immersion,

**Título:** La educación bilingüe: ¿una decisión fácil?.  
**Resumen**  
Hoy en día el fenómeno de la globalización ha subrayado la importancia de la educación bilingüe en nuestras escuelas. Este artículo plantea las dificultades relacionadas con esta elección, por ser una decisión compleja, que baraja muchos diferentes factores como pueden ser el tipo de programa a utilizar, o los contextos específicos de cada centro entre otros. También manifiesta que el resultado de no haber analizado con detalle la implementación de programas bilingües puede ser la ineficacia y fracaso de éstos en nuestras escuelas.

**Palabras clave:** bilingual education, CLIL, multilingualism, immersion.

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In today’s globalized world, bilingual education is a priority issue and as a result, it has been the subject of much research in order to study its effectiveness. The conclusions reached have been many and varied thus leading to confusion and general misunderstandings in this field. In this article, I aim to analyse the different aspects to take into account when considering bilingual education, arguing that the process is anything but simple. In order to do this, I will give a brief summary of the main results of studies in this academic arena outlining the main arguments for and against bilingual education programmes. I will then list current bilingual education trends. The article will also underline the decisive role of subjectivity in reference to bilingual education programmes.

The first question an educational institution has to ask themselves on considering bilingual education programmes is if partaking in these kind of programmes fulfils an educational, cultural, societal, etc. need. The arguments for and against are numerous:

Bilingual education promotes a high level of language proficiency in both languages (Lindholm-Leary: 2001), although it has been argued by other researchers that proficiency in both languages to the same level is not attainable, especially regarding productive skills (Swain and Johnson: 1997). They also claim that another possible disadvantage is that a bilingual programme at school can place the L2 in an educational context and thus makes the L2 learnt artificial and used exclusively at school. Proficiency of the L2 although “proficient” is therefore stunted.

Another possible advantage of bilingual education is that of cognitive enhancement, which in turn ensures high achievement rates in all subjects across the curriculum in early total immersion programmes. It would seem though that this is not the case with partial or late immersion programmes. The reason, according to Johnson and Swain (1994), lies in the development of the L2 abilities enabling understanding of the other subjects: if it is not sufficiently developed the students cannot process the information.

Generally, the students of bilingual classrooms have a positive attitude to learning and in general feel motivated. This can especially be the case of the child who speaks the minority language at home. It implies acceptance of their culture and identity. Bear in mind though that the aforementioned is true if the bilingual language programme is additive but if its
aim is subtractive then there is a risk that the student will become marginalized and as a result demotivated with the corresponding decline in student performance across the curriculum.

Students learn to respect other cultures and become more tolerant of differences. A bilingual education programme therefore is also enriching at a personal level for the students. On the other hand, the fact that there is a dominant culture and language may underline power issues which otherwise are of less relevance in the classroom. (Heller: 1994)

Economically there are more advantages in a strong bilingual education programme (Dutcher and Tucker: 1996) as long term there are less expenses: This is not the same in weaker forms where costs are more or less equal between monolingual programmes and bilingual ones. We should take into account though that both depend on funding and funding in turn on educational policies. If there is a chance that funding of bilingual language programmes will subtract from that of mainstream schooling, funding in the former will be reduced.

Globalization implies a need in society for bilingualism, thus by giving this kind of programme to our students we are fulfilling a twofold aim: that of covering needs in our society and that of improving employment opportunities for our students in the future.

Once the educational institution has decided for or against their participation in a bilingual programme, they must decide which to adopt. If I were to enumerate all the different bilingual education trends that currently exist, this article would take on encyclopaedic proportions but in order that one appreciate more fully the complex multifaceted field that this has become and the resulting difficulties faced on choosing one or the other, I will briefly touch this topic.

Bilingual education up to date has been strongly dominated by monolingual forms of education for bilinguals. They mainly consist in mainstreaming and total submersion i.e. literally being “thrown into the deep end” (Baker: 2011). It has been argued that the main problem with this methodology is that it is subtractive. A further differentiation is that bilingual education programmes can also be divided into weak forms or strong forms. The difference between both is that strong forms of bilingual education have bilingualism, biliteracy and biculterism as intended outcomes, whereas weak ones do not. Examples of weak forms are mainstream programmes with foreign language teaching, transitional programmes or separatist models, whereas examples of strong forms are immersion programmes (early, total, or partial), mainstream bilingual programmes or dual language programmes. The above-mentioned are just a few categories and these can be subdivided into further distinctive programmes: the possibilities then, although not infinite, are quite diverse.

Thus, with reference to the aforementioned, we can appreciate the difficult decision that educational institutions must face when deciding on the implementation of a bilingual programme in their schools. First of all, is a bilingual education programme necessary? If the answer is yes, what form should it take? This decision becomes increasingly more confusing if we underline the fact that bilingual language programmes do not solely depend on current educational policies or theories but are also context specific. Can we be sure that the aforementioned advantages underlined by different studies are the result of bilingual education and are not due to other factors such as the materials used, or parental guidance, the teacher, the specific school, the number of children in the class and so on? A bilingual language programme that has worked in one school does not guarantee that it will work in another school, as the circumstances of each school and student, teachers etc. is different. Generalization of research therefore does not imply that bilingual language programmes will work, just as the success of one type of programme in one school does not guarantee its success in another

To conclude, bilingual educational programmes cannot be implemented solely in light of previous studies and theories. One cannot deny that they are indispensable when making a decision; however, it would seem advisable that institutions weigh not just the general advantages and disadvantages, which in itself is a challenge but also, in order to best find the most suitable bilingual programme, the specific characteristics of the school. With this in mind, it may arise that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages, thus bringing into light that there might be occasions when the implementation of a bilingual programme is not apt. Therefore, bilingual programmes should not be implemented gratuitously as has been the case recently in some Spanish provinces as a means of political propaganda.
Bibliografía

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