Bilingualism In The Us Essay, Research Paper

Bilingualism has had a bad rap lately. Prop 227, the Unz Initiative, successfully passed removing bilingual education from California schools replacing it with English immersion. For some reason, Americans feel that only one language is necessary and that language is English only. Although the general consensus is to remove any form of bilingualism in this country, research has shown that being bilingual is not bad but is actually a good trait to have.

Bilingualism is defined as people who use two languages in the course of their every day life are not identical to those people who use only one language to communicate. For bilingual individuals their two languages form a unitary whole (Valdes, 6). What that means is that anyone who can effectively communicate in two different languages is bilingual. What s added to the definition is an aspect that creates a separation between a mere familiarity with two languages and full communicative skills in two languages. That is important because there are two kinds of bilingual people: elective bilinguals and circumstantial bilinguals. Elective bilinguals are those who choose to become bilingual by taking classes to learn a foreign language (Valdes, 12). Those are people who took French or Spanish in high school or any other form of educational environment. Circumstantial bilinguals are those who learn another language in order to survive (Valdes, 12). These are usually immigrants from foreign countries with different languages. The biggest difference between the two is choice. Elective bilinguals choose to be bilingual while circumstantial bilinguals have no choice. This is important because this paper focuses on circumstantial bilinguals because I will emphasize on the uniqueness of the immigrant experience and why that uniqueness should be embraced rather than shunned.

Richard Rodriguez in his book Hunger of Memory writes about his experience as a second-generation Mexican immigrant growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood and his adventures in figuring out his identity. His first chapter emphasizes on bilingualism, how unnecessary it is and why he hates it. Richard Rodriguez falls under the circumstantial bilingual because he had no choice but to learn English in school. He gives many examples of his bad experiences once he started losing his ability to speak Spanish with his family and community. The way I see it, as with the rest of his book, Richard Rodriguez is only trying to justify his shortcomings while glorifying his accomplishments. He is clearly against bilingualism because he feels a language is a language and it doesn t matter what language you speak but how you say the words (Rodriguez, 37). I do not see this as any reason against bilingualism but merely a bitter man trying to gain vindication for his unhappy childhood. His whole reasoning is faulty because anyone bilingual can tell you that in some languages you can t communicate meanings of words to other languages. Spanish and English are somewhat similar so it is easy to notice a difference but give Richard Rodriguez reasoning to anyone who knows an Asian language and they ll say he s crazy. Retention of ones native language is an important aspect of the cultures of those people, but not vital as Richard Rodriguez would make it seem. He feels that most people see them as one when it is not entirely. He describes a pocho as a Mexican-American who loses her/his Mexican culture during the assimilation process. In some cases it is a derogatory word synonymous to a sellout. Richard Rodriguez is a straight pocho in every sense of the word. He doesn t understand how other people feel, like the people in his own family, and just cares what he justifies his actions as. Bilingualism advocates are not trying to change peoples thinking like he is, but are merely trying to protect what already exists. He is simply a perfect example of someone who managed cross the river of adversity and is trying to burn the bridge behind him.

Bilingual education is a dual-language program designed to provide equal educational opportunities to students of limited English proficiency in their own native language. The U.S. has a large number of students, especially in elementary school, whose home language is not English. Because of the existence of these, the bilingual education program was created to ensure that these students:

+ Learn the basic subjects (reading, arithmetic, science, social studies, etc.) in their home language from the time they enter school. This has the advantage of promoting their academic progress, during the period they are learning the English language,

+ Learn to read and write, first in the home language and, subsequently, in English. Initial literacy skills are developed in the home language and, once the children become orally proficient in English, literacy skills continue to develop in both languages. It is not a question of having to learn to read again once English is introduced, since the individual learns to read only once and, thereafter, transfers the knowledge and skills to the second language,

+ Begin learning English from the time they enter school. The process begins with the development of oral English and, later, with the development of English literacy skills. Thus, the learning of the English language is one of the primary goals of bilingual education,

+ Perceive their culture as an integral part of their education. It is important that the familiar elements of the home be validated in the school environment, as is the case with mainstream children, (Mandera, 91).

A big problem with bilingual education is that prominent people like Richard Rodriguez are against it when they should be for it. Proposition 227, the English for the Children initiative, set a bad mark on bilingualism advocates. What it did, or will eventually do, is remove all English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and replace them with an English immersion program. This is just horrible. There is no proven data on its effectiveness, in fact there is data proving its ineffectiveness. A 1991 report by Dr. James Cummins Ontario Institute for Studies on Education and Dr. Michael Gensuk of USC refuted the notion that intensive exposure to English is the best way of teaching language to minority children, (Cummins). Their study compared English immersion, involving an almost exclusive use of English throughout elementary school, early-exit bilingual, in which Spanish was used for about one-third of the time in kindergarten and first grade then rapidly switch to English, and late-exit bilingual, that taught kindergarten primarily in Spanish then steadily increasing the amount of English thereafter up to about sixty percent in the 5th and 6th grades. They found that late-exit bilingual children performed the best even surpassing the monolingual children s learning rate.