Bilingual Education for Minority Language Students in the US: Lessons from the Case of Elementary School in California

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to analyze trends of bilingual education for minority language students in the US and find applicable and relevant implications for bilingual education, which began in 2009, for multicultural families in South Korea. The result shows that trends of bilingual education in the US changed from “transitional bilingual education” during the early stage to “maintenance bilingual education” and further to the latest “enrichment bilingual education” and “two-way immersion bilingual education.” The findings suggest that bilingual education in the US uses the majority as well as minority language for entire subjects. Second, after a certain period of bilingual acquisition, students of bilingual and general classes participated in the same classes. Third, bilingual education curriculum is connected throughout elementary, middle, and high school education.

Keywords: bilingualism, language minority, dual linguistic, multicultural family

1 Introduction

Currently, ethnic minorities in the US account for one third of the entire population, but the figure is expected to increase to 38% by 2025 and 50% by 2050 [1][2], which explains the increasing attention to bilingual education. Further, various studies support the arguments that diverse culture and language environments are valuable assets to individuals and the nation and that bilingual education promotes stable growth of immigrants and their children while improving national competitiveness [3][4][5][6]. Meanwhile, in South Korea, bilingual education has been conducted since 2009, based on the idea that the different mother tongues and cultural backgrounds of multicultural families are advantageous for social integration. However, it is still in the early stage and there is no specific philosophy behind the policy, as different departments and local organizations continue to operate the programs. This study aims to analyze changes in bilingual education in the US that began 40 years earlier than in South Korea and find meaningful implications that can be applied to bilingual education for multicultural families in South Korea. For analysis, articles; major policy reports by the federal government and education
districts; website documents; reports related to bilingual education in the US; as well as relevant policy reports, and press releases by the South Korean government were reviewed.

2 Types of Bilingual Education for Language-Minority Students in the US

Bilingual education provides a learning environment where students use more than one language. Therefore, two or more languages are in use at schools providing bilingual education, and the contents and levels of the programs vary according to the region. Basic, well-known types of bilingual education programs include transitional programs, maintenance programs, and enrichment programs [8][14]. Transitional programs teach most subjects in the mother tongue of the language-minority students until they can learn in English, and later only uses English. Therefore, the policymakers in the US support this type of program. Maintenance programs have the advantage of securing cognitive development by using two languages while pride in the mother tongue remains intact, as they enable students to maintain their mother tongue while learning English. However, it did not become popular because the students could not significantly improve their English skills. Enrichment programs were designed for students who use English to learn a second language, by teaching subjects only in the second language, so that students would be prepared to adapt to different cultures in the future.

In addition, the two-way immersion bilingual programs mix language-minority students and language-majority students in the same class, so that they can use the combination of two languages as a learning tool. These programs are known to secure identities of students related to their mother tongues while improving adaptability to English. However, they are still being tested [3].

3 Controversy related to Bilingual Education Utility

In the US, a country with multicultural, multi-racial, and multi-ethnic attributes, advocates and opponents debate over the utility of bilingual education. Advocates of bilingual education argue that cultural and linguistic diversity is a national strength that must be nurtured [10]. They emphasize that bilingual education is the most effective method to teach LEP (limited English proficient) students or ELLs (English Language Learners). They believe language-minority students can retain their mother tongue and culture while learning English, and develop learning skills with their mother tongue while simultaneously learning English as the second language. Moreover, the advocates emphasize that diversity is a rich social resource. In fact, Collier and Thomas (1999) demonstrated that bilingual students show stronger cognitive skills and have better academic performance [5]. Further, Krashen (1996) argued that bilingual education helps students improve their academic performance based on the mother tongue education program at school while having interest in subject matters and contents based on the gradual exit program, and that learning and
language skills like literacy and background knowledge must be developed in the first language [11].

However, opponents of bilingual education suggest that bilingual education, in fact, makes students believe they can live without learning the mainstream language. Hence, they become lazy in improving language skills, which results in their failure to acquire either language. Porter (1990), opposing bilingualism as a resource, points out that the ultimate goal of education is to enable all students to function successfully in mainstream society, and that, without a high level of mainstream language proficiency, students will eventually lose opportunities for choosing a job and moving up in social class [12]. Further, Glenn (1997) emphasizes that there is no evidence to suggest that teaching LEP students in their mother tongue brings long-term advantages or disadvantages, and that it is more effective to teach English as the first language [9].

However, a series of studies strongly support the argument that well-designed bilingual education programs promote, and not hinder English development of students [7].

4 Korean Dual-Language Program of an Elementary School in California

The Third Elementary School, a public elementary school in Los Angeles, began to offer Korean Dual-Language Program (KDLP) since 2000. In every grade from the kindergarten to the fifth, one dual-language class is formed for students to learn all subjects in Korean and English. Students can sign up for the dual-language class even if they do not speak the first language, Korean, or the second language English, and in the classroom are both students who speak English fluently and those who do not naturally communicate by using both English and Korean. Furthermore, between the third and fifth grades, students of the dual-language class and other classes participate in “mixing,” which allows them to mix with one another and attend classes of different teachers according to the subject, for some days per week to ultimately improve social adaptability. Meanwhile, Korean dual-language education in LA is continued by the dual-language program at John Boroughs and Berendo Middle School, and Fairfax High School.

The goal of the dual-language program at these renowned schools in LA is to foster students who are proficient in learning and communicating in the second language English, to speak the first language fluently, to show excellent performance in all subjects, and to respect cultural diversity [13].

5 Conclusion and Lessons

In conclusion, the types of bilingual education for language-minority students in the US have changed from transitional bilingualism for assimilation, focused on English in the 1960s, to maintenance bilingualism that recognized the importance of bilingualism during the 1970s and 1980s. This was followed by enrichment
bilingualism that promoted simultaneous acquisition of minority and majority languages. Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, a public elementary school in California is running a “parallel bilingual program,” which is in the experimental stage at present.

The following implications were found in the case study presented before: First, in bilingual education, all subjects are taught in the minority and majority languages, and students and teachers communicate by using both languages, instead of simply teaching English and the mother tongue for communication. Second, after a point when students show noticeable improvement in language skills, for some days of each week, students of the dual language class and general classes are mixed together to study in the same class. Third, the education is continued from the elementary school to middle and high schools as students build the foundation for bilingualism in elementary school, when their cognitive development is most active, and then continue bilingual education programs in higher education.

References