

“Bilingual Education”
Center for Learning in Retirement
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Thank you for again inviting me to speak with you today. I always enjoy visiting with this group of people—you are witty, engaged, and thoughtful—much like the students, faculty and staff at Eastern. You would fit right in!

When I was asked to speak to you today about linguistics, I sat down to think about what I could say that would be informative yet topical, intellectually stimulating yet relevant to life here in Windham County. Linguistics is the study of language and its structure, and is a science that has many different areas of focus. One of them is language acquisition.

Given my own experiences as a native Puerto Rican learning English as a second language and my professional experiences as an educator, the acquisition of a second language and the issue of bilingual education seemed to be a perfect topic to share with you today.

I hope at the end of my comments, that each of you can have an informed opinion on the following question: **“Are you in favor of or against bilingual education?”**

I am going to spend some time sharing my own experiences and perspectives on this issue in the hopes that we can engage in some open discussion at the end of my remarks.

As someone who has a doctorate in the field of language education and linguistics, I want to avoid drowning you in academic jargon.

So let me start off by personalizing the topic—what is it like for someone to move to a new land not knowing the language, being unfamiliar with culture and customs, and having only their immediate family for support? I can tell you—because I am one of those people.

I moved to Newark, New Jersey from the highlands of western Puerto Rico when I was eight years old. No one in my family knew a word of English. We were one of the first Puerto Rican families in Newark, and the only Spanish-speaking residents in our neighborhood. There were no English-as-a-Second-Language courses, no bilingual education in the schools, and certainly no second language instruction for adults.

I spent an entire year in elementary school in a corner with a boy with a learning disability, because my teacher had no skills or tools to help me learn English.

However, by reading the sports pages of the newspaper, comic books, and other materials with few words and lots of visual cues, my father and I slowly picked up rudimentary English. That is how every Latino in America at the time—almost all of us from Puerto Rico—was forced to pick up the language.

That was almost 60 years ago. In the time since, people from all over Latin America have come to this country. English language learning remains an issue for Latinos. To illustrate, I would like to share the thoughts of three young women from other countries who ended up in Hartford, overcame the language barrier, enrolled at Eastern, and have now graduated and started their professional journey.

Orquidea Burgos-Jiménez moved from the Dominican Republic to Hartford when she was in the eighth grade. She didn’t know a word of English. Here is her description of that experience: “The most difficult challenge I faced was clearly the language barrier—I couldn’t speak or understand more than a few words of English—basically I could say, ‘Hi,’ and that was about it. When I got to Hartford High School, I was placed in bilingual and English-as-a-Second Language programs for three years. One particular challenge was when the books were in

English but the language being spoken in class was Spanish. In order to do my homework, I had to read the English lessons with a dictionary and translate the words into Spanish so I could understand the topic well enough to answer the questions in English. It was also very hard to go to school to learn English and then come home to speak only Spanish with my mother.”

Orquidea came to Eastern as a student and ended up interning at a local school and working with the sizable Latino population there, helping children face some of the same issues she confronted 10 years ago. She graduated from Eastern in 2012 and is applying to graduate school in child psychology.

Whitley Mingo, another Dual Enrollment student from Hartford who graduated from Eastern last year, is from Guyana. Her language challenge is writing in English. Here is what she had to say:

“My writing has always been a challenge. If we were taking an essay test in class, I would always be the last one to finish the test, and my essays were always late. As anyone in the field of education knows, the ability to write well is a function of one’s ability to read and comprehend. My problem has always been that I don’t always fully understand the topic or issue being discussed.

“This has been true ever since I was in grade school in East Hartford. In fact, I was held back in the third grade because of this. It wasn’t until my anthropology professor at Eastern said, ‘You seem to need extra time on your papers,’ that I really felt someone was truly interested in helping me improve my writing.” Whitley will go to graduate school, in the field of social work.

My third student example is Federica Bucca. Federica came to the United States from Argentina in 2001, a month after 9/11. She landed at JFK with its barricades, armed guards and K-9 corps—frightened and unable to understand a word of English. Her mother was a single mom, and moved Federica and her two brothers to Hartford, where Federica had some of the same experiences Orquidea had. She says, “When we arrived in Hartford, there were certainly many other people there from Latin America.

“But what many people don’t understand is that each nation is very different. Argentinians, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans—we all speak Spanish, but each country has its own culture, its own traditions. I was meeting all these people who talked differently from me. Even other Latinos who spoke Spanish had a different accent than I had.”

Eventually Federica made it to our campus, and she blossomed. She graduated a year ago, and today, she is in a master’s program in education and counseling at Providence College and is also a resident hall director.

All three of these students could not have succeeded at Eastern and graduated without having above-average English language skills, yet each describes one or more challenges that face second language learners.

There are literally thousands of languages spoken on the Earth, and people arrive on America’s shores from many other countries. However, due to the growing Latino population in our country, in Connecticut, and locally as well, I am going to focus on people from Latin American countries learning to speak English in the United States. Latinos certainly dominate the “English Language Learner” student category; in California, for instance, 85 percent of all English Language Learners are Latino. The next largest group—Vietnamese—is two percent.

As I said earlier, I want this to be a scholarly lecture on the science and study of language acquisition. That is not to say that there has not been a substantial body of work done in this area. Perhaps some of you have heard of Noam Chomsky, whose theory of “universal grammar” held

that all children share an innate capacity to learn languages; that it is a natural skill built into our DNA.

Or B. F. Skinner, whose major premise was that language acquisition is based on one's social environment. Steven Pinker, who has taught at MIT and is now at Harvard University, has also had important contributions in the field, ranging from the relationship of the sound of words to language acquisition, to how people develop their use of the past tense. Much of his work centers on how the brain itself works.

There are dozens of other major contributors to the study of linguistics and language development, a plethora of learning models, and scores of teaching styles related to learning language. We could spend an entire summer learning more about this field. My job today is to synthesize all of this knowledge and my own research, observation, and experiences, into a few memorable concepts that we can use to frame our discussion about bilingual education in the Latino community.

1. **People learn language to fulfill different needs, and therefore develop different language skills—not always at the same time.** We learn conversational language most quickly—through social interaction. Being able to speak a language is key to being accepted into society. Reading comprehension is next, a skill fundamental to applying for a driver's license, filing out a job application, or developing an understanding of a new culture, its customs and its history. Learning to write in a new language—syntax, subject-verb agreement, vocabulary, is last—and is key to going to college and aspiring to higher level careers. Even when children are immersed in language acquisition over several years, writing skills take the longest. Whitley told us that.
2. **Children should learn to read in their native language before they learn to read in English.** The faculty at Eastern, through a three-year federal reading grant, has documented this. It is simply logical that it is easier to learn to read in one's native language, the language spoken at the supper table and in the play yard. It also makes sense that developing reading skills in one's native language will make learning to read in another language easier. For instance, if children can't hear and differentiate between phonemes (the smallest sounds in language, like the sound that the letter P makes) in their first language, it's really hard to teach them how to sound out letters in order to read in a new language.
The hurdle we have to clear, however, is that many Latinos immigrating to our country are not their nation's doctors, accountants, lawyers, and engineers.
People crossing the Rio Grande in the dead of night, or flying by plane from San Juan during the day, are often coming from meager means, perhaps even lacking a grade school education in their own lands. Those families don't have Spanish books at home to read to their children. The parents themselves may not be able to read or write, even though they are fluent conversationally in Spanish.
3. **Children's language learning must be reinforced in the home.** As Orquidea noted, if a child spends all day learning English in school, only to come home to a household where only Spanish is spoken—it's a case of one step forward and two steps back. Having books at home to read—both English and Spanish—is also fundamental to advancing reading skills.

It is important to make the point that Spanish-dominant households in the United States are not due to recent immigration. In fact, 75 percent of ESL students in our country were born here. Some families are two and three generations removed from their home lands, yet the

grandparents and parents have never learned English. There has always been “ghettos” for immigrants. (Jewish ghetto, Irish ghetto and Latino ghetto)

4. **Language acquisition is a social experience.** You cannot learn a new language if you are isolated from the society you are trying to become part of. That is why ESL instruction—where all the students in the room are non-English speakers—has been found to be less effective than bilingual education, where non-native English speakers, in this case, Latinos, are in class with English-speaking students. They learn each other’s cultures, they learn how to live together, and they teach other that we are more alike than we are different.
5. **We also cannot ignore the impact of cultural differences on language learning.** If you talk to people who teach bilingual education, you discover that the good teachers have taken time to learn Latino culture. They are able to compare aspects of art, music, food, and other cultural phenomena to their students. They appreciate some of the more subtle aspects of cultural differences and accommodate accordingly. In 2006, the Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies (AHAA) released its report, “The Latino Identity Project.” It detailed a number of cultural differences between the Anglo and Latino populations that impact commerce, education, politics ranging from religion to time reference, from family to gender. It grouped cultural attributes into four categories: Gender Perception; Time/Space Perception; Spirituality; and Interpersonal Orientation. For instance, while Latino cultures generally take a more traditional view of gender roles, the dominant American culture emphasizes women’s rights and equality of the sexes. When Latinos and Anglos sit down for a meeting, neither is being rude when one group wants to get started promptly at 9 a.m. while the other needs to reestablish social connections. These are just two examples of culturally-embedded perceptions and behavior. Understanding cultural differences helps make bilingual instructors better teachers.
6. **Of the three basic models of English Language instruction, I believe that the dual language model has the most benefit for students—Latinos and other participating students.** Again, English Language instruction encompasses three major models.
 - A. **English-as-a-Second Language instruction.** ESL classes can consist of students with the same native language—let’s say Spanish—or students with a number of native languages all in the same class. They are not mixed with native English speaking students, and the goal of the instruction is simply to teach them English language skills. ESL teachers speak only English in class.
 - B. **Transitional.** These “early exit” programs range widely in terms of the amount of English and Spanish being used in class, with the goal to transition the English Language Learners into mainstream classes as soon as possible.
 - C. **Bilingual.** Bilingual education can come in two formats: In one case, the class exists solely of Spanish-speaking students learning English, with the teacher speaking both Spanish and English. This is called one-way bilingual programming. The second model, the one Windham’s Companeros program uses, has Spanish-speaking students sitting next to English-speaking students; this is called “dual language, two-way” bilingual programming. Both Spanish and English are taught in class, switching back and forth. Cultures are shared. And in some cases, subject matter classes (math, science) are taught to the same cohort. Extensive research in California, Texas, and Florida, among other states, has shown that Latino students in the dual language bilingual model learn

English at a higher level of proficiency and experience more long-term educational gains than in one-way bilingual settings, ESL classes, or transitional programs.

7. **Latino children should learn English as preschoolers – not learn to read.** National data suggests that a child who enters first grade without grade-level English language skills is one year behind the day he or she walks through the door. Citing a study by the National Council of La Raza, Cynthia G. Brown explained: “By first grade, there is a full one-year reading gap between English Language Learners and their English-proficient peers, which grows to a two-year gap by the fifth grade. High-quality preschool opportunities can reduce these gaps.”
8. **Cultural awareness works both ways,** another reason why bilingual programs that include both non-native English speakers and English-speaking students in the same classroom — learning each other’s language and culture — have been so successful. Two George Mason University professors studied six million student records and found that full-immersion, “two-way” bilingual programs are more effective than either ESL coursework or hybrid transitional models. In addition, learning language and culture side-by-side as children makes their communities stronger when those children grow up to be the leaders of their communities. (Companeros Program)
9. **English language acquisition in Latino children predicts their future success.** It gives them the tools to gain economic freedom. It is the basis for learning other skills. Latino children who cannot speak, read, and write English are not likely to graduate from high school, cannot go to college in this country, and have little chance of fulfilling any dreams they might have of being a professional—a doctor, a teacher, an engineer, an architect.

Clearly learning the English language is a personal imperative for Latinos. And hearing how that process occurs no doubt sounds interesting to all of you—some of the stories are even poignant. But what makes this topic of vital importance to you and to other citizens who don’t have to learn a new language? What are the social implications of having a growing Latino population that does not have English language skills?

Let us first look at the national picture. You have seen the demographic data—Latinos are our nation’s fastest growing sector, accounting for most of the country’s population growth from 2000 to 2010.

The number of students classified as English Language Learners is also growing. The number of school-age children who speak a language other than English doubled between 1980 and 2009, and they now make up 21 percent of all school-age kids. There were 5 million students classified as “English language learners” – those who have not yet achieved proficiency in English – in the 2009-10 school year, or about 10 percent of all children enrolled, according to the U.S. Department of Education. How important is it that this instruction be successful?

Georgetown University researchers tell us that two-thirds of the jobs over the next five years will require some form of college degree. Latinos won’t be going to college, won’t be performing those jobs if they can’t read and write in English.

Other experts tell us our Gross Domestic Product could grow by \$2 billion a year if our Latino population graduated from college at the rate of Caucasians. Consider the other side of that coin. People without an education in this country cost the public about \$1 million over a lifetime in additional welfare, unemployment, public health, and other tax-supported expenditures. **Language acquisition for Latinos makes dollars and sense!**

Now let's look at Connecticut. Like our nation, the increase in Connecticut's Latino population far outstrips overall population growth; in this century's first decade, Connecticut's population grew five percent; the Latino population grew 50%!

However, more than 80,000 families in Connecticut speak no English in their home. There are 34,000-35,000 English Language Learners in Connecticut, most of them are Latino, and that figure that is growing 4-5 percent each year.

Connecticut state law provides for up to 30 months of bilingual education, followed by Language Transition Support Services, including ESL instruction. Many educators feel the 30-month ceiling on bilingual instruction is half of the five years needed.

Eight years ago, one of every 27 students in the state was classified as speaking very limited English; today the ratio is one in 18, a net gain of almost 9,000 students. Yet since 2005, the number of bilingual certified teachers has dropped 34 percent in Connecticut. And at Hartford Public High School, three certified instructors teach more than 100 English Language Learners in eight different languages.

Researchers calculate that if Connecticut's Latino population graduated from college at the same rate of whites, our Latino population would see an additional \$8 billion a year (that's "Billion"!) in personal income.

Think of the hundreds of millions of dollars in state income tax and other economic impact of having an educated, literate Latino community! We need to do a better job of teaching English to Connecticut's young Latinos if we want them to go to college and succeed.

So far, I have shared what is happening nationally and statewide in the area of bilingual education. Let's zero in now on Willimantic, the largest nearby community, and learn why bilingual education is so important in our town. Picture yourself back in 1956, when the American Thread Company and the Hartford Poultry Company were booming. Each sent paid recruiters — \$50 a head! — to Puerto Rico to bring back planeloads of Puerto Ricans. They were American citizens with no visa problems and were happy to work at low wages—pay that nonetheless was higher than what they were earning in Puerto Rico.

Entire floors of workers at the American Thread Company spoke only Spanish, which of course created a disincentive to learn English. They lived under de facto residential segregation, in housing projects set apart from other neighborhoods with names like Windham Heights, Ivy Gardens, and Village Heights.

Puerto Ricans in Willimantic felt culturally isolated. And when Windham Schools began bilingual classes in the 1970s, "It felt like a caste system," according to one Puerto Rican woman. Another Puerto Rican living in Willimantic at the time said, "If you couldn't speak English, they would put you in special ed."

In 1972, Hartford Poultry closed, followed by American Thread in 1985. They left behind a Puerto Rican community that was entrenched yet without the job skills, language skills, and political power to improve their condition.

Yet they continued coming to Willimantic, seeking a better life than they had in El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Puerto Rico.

Today, almost 50 percent of Willimantic's residents are Latino. But unlike the 1960s, when they all were from Puerto Rico, we have people from Honduras, Ecuador, Mexico City, Peru—from more than 20 countries in Latin America. Perhaps as many as 70 percent of the school-aged population is Latino—an imprecise figure because so many local Latinos are undocumented. They are not U.S. citizens, and disappear when services that require identification are offered. And they are not a monolithic group. As Federica and Orquidea

mentioned, Latinos may all speak Spanish, but dialects vary widely, and cultures are just as diverse. Given this scenario, how are we helping what will soon be the majority of local residents?

I am sure by now I sound like an unrepentant bilingual enthusiast. I am a critic of bilingual education. The fact is, you can find failed dual language programs in California, in New York City, in other parts of our country. Learning a new language is just one of the challenges confronting Latinos. They now constitute the majority of our urban poor in many cities, and until we also deal with such issues as nutrition, teenage pregnancy, employment opportunities, and more, we cannot expect miracles to routinely occur in dual language literacy programs.

But I do reject the politicization of bilingual education. Well-funded opponents of bilingual education have been able to pass laws in California, Arizona, and elsewhere that mandate only ESL programs for non-English speaking students. That means “English Only.” When you unpeel the rhetoric, what you find are people who oppose multiculturalism. They want newcomers to our land to erase their past, forget their native language and heritage, learn English out of context, and mold themselves into “Americans.”

Such opponents miss the point entirely. Being an American means accepting and respecting people from all over the world. It means celebrating our common strengths as well as our differences. We are stronger when we learn about the many different cultures that represent the diverse backgrounds of the American people.

Across our nation, in our state of Connecticut, and here in Greater Windham, the sheer numbers of Latinos without English language skills—people who need to join our economy and our society as tax-paying productive members of our communities—makes English language acquisition a moral, social, and economic imperative. Dual language, “two-way” bilingual education appears to show the most promise. We have our work to do. But I truly believe that our nation’s future is at stake.

So I have shared my own perspective on the question of bilingual education. Let me stop and hear from you now. **“Are you in favor of or against bilingual education?”**