Bilingual Education Comparative Study: The United States and Costa Rica

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Bilingual Education has many names, forms, missions, and styles that depend on the location of establishment, the philosophy of the leaders, and the politics of the country. Therefore, differences appear between the bilingual education systems in the United States and Costa Rica. When one studies the history of bilingual education in each country, one can see that while bilingual education has functioned for many decades in the United States, bilingual education is a new system for Costa Rica. The foci and goals of the two systems appear as polar opposites, according to American authors of academic articles. Curiously, the politics supporting the different systems create the differing philosophies, the unique foci, and the defined expectations, resulting in differing curricula for each country and bilingual education program. Everything that defines bilingual education in each country reflects the politics of the country and the political objectives for the country’s citizens.

The bilingual education system in the United States is not new for the schools nor for the students. According to Juan Clemente Zamora, “Las primeras escuelas bilingües…de los Estados Unidos fueron las de las misiones españolas desde la Florida hasta California” [the first bilingual schools in the United States were those of the Spanish missionaries from Florida to California] in the epoch of the Spanish colonizers in those territories (308; Heider translation). Zamora says that the explorer Columbus knew “las ventajas de utilizar las lenguas indígenas, y sus elementos culturales, en la educación” [the advantages of utilizing indigenous languages, and their cultures, in education] causing Columbus to order his explorers “fuera a vivir con los indios para aprender la lengua y la cultura de ellos” [to go live with the Indians to learn their language and culture] (308-9; Heider translation). The first colonizers in the United States understood the importance of understanding and living bilingual lives with the indigenous peoples in order to survive with an enriched life and with more advantages than colonizers of other territories. The
Spanish schools and learning of Columbus’s time were private, and the 1800’s also demonstrated a lack of public bilingual schools. However, around 1840, citizens in the state of Ohio recognized the need for a lay to establish German-English public schools for the German minority in the state (Zamora 309). These schools would teach in German and in English, marking the origin of public bilingual education in the United States, according to Zamora (309). Already in 1840 a school was established to help the minority with their studies to gain better lives by living and understanding the two languages used in the state.

The next appearance of advocating for bilingual education emerged in 1968 with the Bilingual Education Act. This law “se caracteriza de una parte por la actividad en el campo legal….por el Congreso Federal” [characterizes activity on behalf of the Federal Congress] (Zamora 310; Heider translation). Zamora states that this law provided federal funds for bilingual programs and that “aunque no estableció la obligatoriedad de la educación bilingüe, es de indudable importancia porque significó el reconocimiento a nivel nacional del problema y permitió el desarrollo de innumerables programas” [although the law did not establish an obligation for bilingual education, it established an uncontested importance because it showed a national recognition of a problem and permitted the development of innumerable programs] (310-11; Heider translation). However, while Zamora considers this law a benefit for the bilingual education system in the United States, Teresa Fernández Ulloa believes that this moment marked the beginning of ambiguities and hidden agendas in the federal government’s use of bilingual education. Ulloa asserts that “Desde 1968, año en el que comenzó el apoyo federal a los programas bilingües, las políticas gubernamentales en esta cuestión han sido ambiguas y contradictorias por razones políticas” [Since 1968, the year that began federal support for bilingual programs, the government’s policies in question have been ambiguous and
contradictory for political reasons] (3; Heider translation). Ulloa presents the idea that the
government pretends to engage in “la americanización del inmigrante” [the Americanization of
the immigrant] without recognizing ethnic or cultural differences (3; Heider translation). Ulloa’s
words show a visual of how the government has an alternative agenda that does not involve
educating students to experience the advantages of bilingualism.

In a similar manner, some academic authors question whether the English Language
Acquisition Act of 2001 has an alternate agenda for schools. As a result of this law, “En el año
2002, el Congreso rechazó la Ley de Educación Bilingüe, que había financiado el desarrollo de
programas, la formación de profesores y los servicios de apoyo durante más de treinta años” [in
the year 2002, Congress replaced the Bilingual Education Act, which financed the development
of bilingual programs, the education of instructors, and the support services for bilingual
programs for more than thirty years] (Ulloa 3; Heider translation). Ulloa believes that this law
replaces bilingual education with another plan: “La ley que la reemplazó, Ley de Adquisición de
la Lengua Inglesa, elimina todas las referencias al bilingüismo e incluye provisiones concebidas
para desanimar la instrucción en la lengua nativa” [The law that replaced the Bilingual Education
Act, the English Language Acquisition Act, eliminates all references to bilingualism and
includes provisions for discouraging instruction in the native language] (3; Heider translation).
Furthermore, Joel Spring agrees with Ulloa about the negative attitude against bilingual goals for
the country. In his published work, Spring says that “The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
transforms the original goals of the bilingual education movement….The No Child Left Behind
Act clearly places the federal government’s support on the side of English acquisition as opposed
to bilingual education” (167). Additionally, Spring believes the national government ensures
that state legislatures are not able to use federal funds in support of bilingual programs (172).
Ulloa assertively states “No se trata de hacerlos bilingües, sino de enseñarles inglés” [They do not try to make student bilingual, but only try to teach English] (3; Heider translation). In response to this change in political goals, bilingual education curricula must change throughout the United States.

In Costa Rican classrooms, the bilingual education system does not boast as extensive of a history covering many epochs as the history of the United States bilingual program demonstrates. Yet, Costa Rica’s national government greatly influenced bilingual schools in the small country like the United States government influenced its country’s bilingual education program. To mark the beginning of the history of Costa Rican bilingual education, first one must look at the history surrounding the instruction of English in the country’s records. According to Dr. Manuel A. Escalante, the year 1824 marked when “foreign languages were first registered as a requirement among the subjects to be taught in the secondary curriculum” in Costa Rica (11). However, this movement supported only the instruction of English as a foreign language, not bilingual education. Also without a focus on bilingual instruction, in 1960 Professor Elsa Orozco established a university program to earn a specialization in English Language; as a result, Professor Orozco “is considered by many in Costa Rica as the modern founder of English language education in the country” (Escalante 11). Orozco’s work facilitated the founding of other movements for improving the instruction of English in Costa Rica. For example, in 1991 the Ministry of Public Education in Costa Rica accepted the help of the British government with Project LEARN in order to support and advance the instruction of English throughout the country with materials and English teachers (Escalante 11). This project “has resulted in numerous publications by Costa Rican educators” which is a great push toward the independence of the authors and national education system in Costa Rica (Escalante 12). With the developing
independence surrounding English instruction, the Costa Rican system of education opened doors to implementing more efficient bilingual schools in the future.

Although English has been taught in some Costa Rican schools since approximately 1824, the Methodist College of Costa Rica affirms that their school became the first private bilingual school with 89 years of service to the country (Long). According to their website, Luis and Marian Fiske founded the Methodist College of Costa Rica on March 28, 1921, and the founders had “una meta clara: una escuela bilingüe de prestigio con influencia en el progreso de Costa Rica, formando personas integralmente con lo mejor de la pedagogía” [a clear goal: one prestigious bilingual school with influence in the progress of Costa Rica, forming integrated people with the best pedagogy] (“Nuestra Historia”; Heider translation). Mr. and Mrs. Fiske established a private school; as a result, not all Costa Ricans possessed access to the bilingual atmosphere established in this particular school. The history of public bilingual education in Costa Rica begins with the presidency of José María Figueres Olsen between 1994-1998 when he “advocated…compulsory English-language instruction” in all Costa Rican classrooms (Escalante 5-11). Olsen’s campaign sparked the first instance of presidential support for bilingual education in Costa Rica’s public schools (Escalante 5-11). This commencement of governmental support began the phase of experimental bilingual schools in Costa Rica.

In 2001, the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education announced and published a proposal for their creation of public French-Spanish schools, which outlines and describes how the Ministry would execute the experimental phase of bilingual education. According to the proposal, Costa Rica wants to modernize the education system, and “Acorde con este proceso de modernización de nuestro país, el Ministerio de Educación, en aras de brindar a la niñez costarricense mejores oportunidades, inicia en el año 2000 la enseñanza bilingüe a niños a partir
de los cinco años” (Ministerio, División de Desarrollo Curricular 3). The entire “Justification” section of the proposal lists reasons implying the necessity for bilingual programs in Costa Rica. In general, the Ministry believes that “El aprendizaje de una segunda lengua es, pues, una necesidad imperiosa en el contexto de un país que se prepara para el advenimiento del tercer milenio….y fortalece en el alumno valores como por ejemplo: la tolerancia, la apertura y el respeto hacia los demás” [the learning of a second language is an imperative need in the context of a country preparing for the advances of the third millennium….and fortifies the student with values such as tolerance, openness, and respect for others] (Ministerio, División de Desarrollo Curricular 3; Heider translation). Therefore, experimental bilingual schools opened their doors to empower students by preparing them for modern demands of life.

The Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education also published a “Program of Studies” in 2007 that describes the English classes at the preschool level in the transition cycle implemented in Costa Rican schools. Already, at the preschool level, instructors teach English by following a detailed curriculum, outlined in “study blocks” with great detail given to teaching practices (Ministerio “Programa” 5). Also, the Ministry published the “Informe Nacional sobre el Desarrollo de la Educación en Costa Rica” [National Report about the Development of Education in Costa Rica] around this time, which mentions the implementation of English lessons into the preschool programs’ schedules (Heider translation). The National Report mandates 10 Spanish lessons each week in all public schools in the country (Ministerio “Informe” 10). Additionally, the National Report proclaims the creation of seven new experimental bilingual schools; similarly, these seven experimental schools must include 10 English lessons per week in support of the development of English in the students’ lives (Ministerio “Informe” 17). Thus, each language is taught for the same amount of time each
week, according to the Report. Also, the National Report announces new policies for the development of education in Costa Rica. Policy number 16 refers to the promotion of second languages in public schools, especially supporting new English services for schools (Ministerio “Informe” 23). Overall, the National Report recently promoted the development of bilingual schools and programs in Costa Rica.

With the development of bilingual programs in many countries around the world, three types have been used most frequently. When considering types of bilingual education, one must recognize that English as a Second Language (ESL) programs do not qualify as bilingual programs: “el ESL de por sí no constituye educación bilingüe” [ESL does not constitute bilingual education] (Zamora 308; Heider translation). Spring agrees with Zamora, saying “Unlike bilingual education programs, no attempt is made to teach reading and writing in the native language of the students” in ESL programs (Spring 170). Thus, ESL is not considered in the same category as bilingual education in this essay. The three most popular types of bilingual education include developmental or maintenance bilingual education, dual or two-way bilingual education, and transitional bilingual education.

Developmental or maintenance bilingual education focuses on “la preservación de la lengua [maternal]”, or the preservation of the mother language, before and during the learning of the second language (Zamora 309). Sonia Toledo adds that this type “se basa en el desarrollo de la capacidad académica y la alfabetización en lengua nativa, antes de efectuar una transición” [is based on the development of academic capacities and the literacy of the native language, before effecting a transition] (41; Heider translation). When a student can sufficiently read and write in his or her mother language, the teacher introduces the second language, and ultimately will teach in both the native language and the second language (Spring 167). Developmental or
maintenance bilingual education does not support learning English rapidly, but supports maintaining the identity and presence of the mother language in the students’ lives. This program extends 5-6 years until the student reaches the level of fluency in both languages (Toledo 41). Spring states that the developmental bilingual classroom “avoids the problem of learning being delayed until students learn English” (167). Students can learn how to read and write without setbacks from language barriers. The developmental bilingual program maintains the mother language because the philosophy of this type of bilingual education centers on the belief that students need to identify with their roots while learning a new, second language in the program.

Scholars refer to the second type of bilingual education popular in the Americas as dual bilingual education or two-way bilingual education. This type of bilingual classrooms consists of Spanish-speaking and English-speaking students at the same time. Many scholars refer to Spanish-speaking students as “hispanohablantes” and the English-speaking students as Anglo-Saxons or “Anglosajones” in research of this bilingual program. Instructors teach in both English and Spanish so that students become fluent in both languages (Toledo 41). Spring states that the goal of this program focuses on students becoming bilingual in English and another language, not necessarily Spanish, but 50% of the students represent each language (168). Toledo records that “El aspecto más importante de este programa bilingüe es que los estudiantes sirven reciprocamente de maestros ayudantes de sus compañeros” [the most important aspect of this bilingual program is that students serve as teachers helping their classmates] (41; Heider translation). The students not only learn from the instructor, but also from each other. Each student teaches and learns at the same time, enriching his or her personality and life skills.
According to Spring, the third type of bilingual education, transitional bilingual education (TBE), does not actually aim to create bilingual students (168). Spring believes TBE only teaches English to students who do not presently speak English. Toledo calls this type of bilingual education “Educación Bilingüe de Salida Temprana” or early-exit bilingual education, and says it is not the “most accepted type” in bilingual education (41). According to Toledo, TBE functions with the class taught in students’ native language with the gradual implementation of general education courses taught in only English, with aid lasting no more than three years for any particular student (41). The goal of TBE centers on transitioning students without English-speaking knowledge into students who can understand, learn, and survive in English classes and life. United States bilingual education programs most often resemble transitional bilingual education classrooms as outlined by Spring and Toledo. Ulloa states that TBE is “más eficaz que varias formas de enseñanza totalmente en inglés” [more effective than various forms of English-only instruction] for immigrants to the United States (3). In Costa Rica, TBE programs demonstrate efficiency. However, Costa Rican schools only employ TBE programs to introduce and begin bilingual education that will continue in other formats throughout the rest of the students’ academic careers (Ministerio “Programa” 7).

After examining the development of bilingual education in each country, one can read the countries’ philosophies supporting bilingual programs and understand how deliberate word selection expresses the goals and expectations reflecting each country’s attitude and influencing the respective curricula. The Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education’s word choice reflects the sincere and positive bilingual goals for raising bilingual children. For example, in the Justification section of the Ministry’s proposal for creating French-Spanish bilingual schools, the Ministry reports that the project aims to develop “sentimientos de solidaridad y humanidad con
sus semejantes y velarán por la calidad de vida de los ciudadanos del mundo” [feelings of solidarity and humanity with others and ensure quality of life for worldly citizens] for their bilingual students (Ministerio, División de Desarrollo Curricular 3; Heider translation). When discussing the bilingual curriculum, the Ministry uses phrases such as “para armonizar los métodos pedagógicos” [in order to harmonize pedagogical methods] to describe how they are going to teach two languages in one classroom (Ministerio, División de Desarrollo Curricular 10; Heider translation). The verb “armonizar”, or to harmonize, possesses positive, coordinated, and optimistic connotations of tranquility and respect. The harmonization of two languages embodies a clear and useful goal, exemplifying many of the Ministry’s goals for Costa Rica’s bilingual programs.

Consequentially, the words in the Ministry’s goals portray strength and vigor. The Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education writes that the bilingual programs will “amplify” students’ lives: “La apreciación de otros modelos culturales les permitirá ampliar su esquema de pensamiento y desarrollar el sentido de la criticidad y autonomía en su forma de ser, pensar y trabajar. Así, podrán analizar la problemática…de una forma objetiva a la luz de los derechos y deberes humanos” [The appreciation of other cultural models permits the amplification of one’s way of thinking and develops a feeling of criticality and autonomy in one’s self, thoughts, and work. Thus, students can analyze problems…with the objective in the light of human rights and duties] (Ministerio, División de Desarrollo Curricular 4; Heider translation). The words “ampliar” [to amplify], “autonomía” [autonomy], “desarrollar” [development], y “luz” [light] provide a feeling of clear comprehension at a global, cognitive level (Heider translation). The deliberate selection of positive and optimistic words indicate the founders’ sincere desire to improve the quality of life for students with bilingual education. The Costa Rican government
and educators do not wish to assimilate children into the current dominant world culture, but desire to provide global opportunities for students.

On the other hand, the attitude reflected in the words and goals of the United States’ bilingual program appear negative and of total national control, not of open doors for students like in Costa Rica. This closed and controlled feeling can be felt in the goals of the new English Language Acquisition Act, which “clearly spell out the antibilingual education agenda…[because] the goals focus on teaching English in the context of state academic standards and…testing” (Spring 172). Spring also reports that every national office in the Bilingual Education federal department changed its title to contain the word “Acquisition” and eliminated references to bilingualism with the implementation of the English Language Acquisition Act (172). The rapid acquisition of English began replacing bilingual education in the United States. In fact, academic author James Noll states that “both bilingual education advocates and opponents claim their goal is full English literacy as rapidly as possible” (298). Noll cites an 1871 San Francisco school superintendent using words such as “under the care of American teachers” immigrant youth could be “molded in the true form of American citizenship” in order to describe the goals of the programs replacing bilingual education in the United States (295-298). The selection of closed and definitive words enforces a limit on student progress. Rather than mentioning respect for other cultures and languages through bilingual education programs, these words indicate how the national government desires to “mold” students into preconceived forms. Never do the United States’ goals mention a harmonization of two languages in the classroom such as Costa Rican goals describe. The United States government appears to only want to “control” and “mold” immigrant students to students who can learn in English classrooms and progress rapidly.
In conclusion, the United States’ and Costa Rican development of bilingual education programs differ on many levels. As a result, the philosophies and goals of the bilingual education systems in each country define and affect the curricula: the United States’ program now centers solely on the acquisition of English, as Costa Rica develops its national curriculum in an experimental phase of establishing public bilingual schools. Furthermore, the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education mentions and centers on the positives of bilingual education for Costa Rican students. The Costa Rican Ministry emanates an individual focus for raising bilingual students who will live a better life in whatever community they choose. On the contrary, the United States government enforces a focus on assimilating and molding students to live in the English community. The Costa Rican bilingual programs possess a personal focus, while the United States’ programs focus on the success of the education system and English community. The Costa Rican bilingual education system continues to develop, and both countries continue to demonstrate vastly different goals and philosophies for their bilingual education systems and students.
Works Cited


