

Walking a Fine Line

Tensions in Bilingual Education for Asian Languages in the United States

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Bilingual education has steadily risen in the United States since the Supreme Court case of *Lau vs. Nichols* in 1974. Set in San Francisco's Chinatown, Kinney Lau and his Cantonese-speaking classmates argued that the limited bilingual or ESL support offered from his public school disproportionately affected access to a meaningful and equitable education, violating Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Winning the case in a landslide victory, bilingual education programs have since expanded across the nation nearly fifty years later, with 3,649 one-way and two-way programs in the U.S. serving children from one, two or multiple linguistic communities (American Councils Research Center, 2021). Spanish-English dual language programs account for 2,936 or 80.5% of all bilingual programs, serving the largest population of individuals who speak a language other than English (LOTE) in the U.S. (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022).

Despite this proliferation of bilingual programs, notable challenges and discrepancies exist for bilingual programs devoted to Asian lan-

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guages and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. In 2021, the American Councils Research Center documented 312 Chinese bilingual or dual language programs (8.6% of all bilingual programs), 37 Japanese programs (1.0%), 27 Hawaiian programs (0.7%), 23 Korean programs (0.6%), seven Hmong programs (0.2%), six Vietnamese programs (2%), two Urdu programs (0.05%) and one Bengali program (0.03%). As a special note, despite the *Lau vs. Nichols* (1964) case representing bilingual support for a *Cantonese*-speaking community, organizations continue to aggregate all Chinese varieties as “Chinese”, reinforcing the hegemonic status of Mandarin/Putonghua and erasing speakers of other Chinese language varieties, including Cantonese, Fuchow, Hakka, Hokkin, and Wu whose speakers are well represented in the United States. For the purposes of comparing statistics and relative representation of bilingual programs among Asian languages, “Chinese” is used in this commentary.

These numbers illuminate alarming discrepancies for non-Chinese Asian languages, including a dearth of programs for Hmong, Vietnamese, and Bengali-speaking communities, and a total lack of bilingual schools for speakers of Hindi, Punjabi, and Tagalog, which are among the top ten languages spoken in the United States (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). Simultaneously, Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin bilingual schools are represented (slightly) beyond the proportion of LOTE speakers from these respective communities (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022) and distributed in areas of the United States that do not necessarily have large Japanese, Korean, or Chinese communities. The misalignment between Asian language speakers and Asian language bilingual school programs thus begs the question: Who decides which Asian languages should be represented in bilingual schools? Who enrolls in these schools and for whom are they designed?

The rising interest in Asian languages is as exciting as it is concerning. Much like the adage of “walking a fine line,” there are dualities to this movement that must be attended to with great discernment, or risk great damage to Asian American communities as a whole. When it comes to language education, the instructional content is never truly agnostic to the teachers who deliver it, as language is inextricably linked to communication, culture, and ultimately, the humanity of those whose heritage it conveys. Therefore, educators must make themselves aware of the fine lines that exist between these hopeful shifts and cautionary challenges, which are described from three perspectives below.

First and foremost, one must attend to the distinction between *value* versus *commodification*. As a nation, the U.S. has been slow to

embrace multilingualism (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022), rooted in decades of “English-first” programming in schools that touted the education of the English language in isolation as best practice (Guillixson, 1999). However, the influence of the global economy in recent decades has positioned multilingualism as a desirable skill, lending newfound credibility and value to multilingual speakers, particularly of economically advantageous languages such as Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean. While this increased desire for Asian language education presents itself as a welcome shift, it may well be disguised commodification if the purpose of such programs is to provide an economic edge to learners, rather than an embrace of the language and its intercultural value (Heller, 2003).

As a case in point to the weak foundation, the COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant stressors brought rise to alarming policy and attitude changes, restricting Asian immigration and cross-cultural exchange (Wang & Yu, 2021). This signaled a codification and endorsement of anti-Asian sentiment, racial discrimination, and attacks directed at Chinese people, and unfortunately impacting individuals of all Asian descent groups in the U.S. (Chen et al., 2020). Reminiscent of the Japanese incarceration during World War II, societal ignorance and hate directed toward Asian-presenting individuals spread regardless of nationality or citizenship, reinforcing Asian Americans’ status as outsiders and “forever foreigners” (Takaki, 1998) in this country. The sentiment driving these actions is demeaning and dangerous to AAPI communities, further indicating that Asian languages may be valued as a commodity, but not as a culture or a humanity. Additionally, with a diversity of 21 Asian origin groups in the U.S. representing 51 countries in the continent of Asia (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), the demand for only a specific few languages overshadows the wealth of cultural heritages within the AAPI community. Given the dominance of English monolingual education in the U.S., the existence of such a diverse range of Asian languages is still relatively less known. This indicates all the more that Asian language education must prioritize holistic value for the language and its accompanying people and cultures, or risk exploiting the language for its economic usefulness alone.

This dynamic unearths the duality of *language* versus *people*. As noted, English-first and English-only policies in the U.S. educational system have resulted in a diminished societal value on multilingualism arising from immigrant or foreign language speakers (Gándara & Escamilla, 2016), as opposed to multilingualism arising from those already proficient in the English language. This inequitable respectability extends the commodification of Asian language education to

the teachers themselves; recruited for their linguistic skill set, but not fully seen or valued for all that they bring to schools and students as culturally and linguistically diverse individuals (Chan Hill, 2023). On the one hand, the scarcity of qualified teachers to meet the demand for Asian language education has increased employment opportunities and job security; yet, in the same breath, this demand attends to only one aspect of the teacher's identity as a language resource, and potentially dehumanizes their role within the educational system.

While there is certainly an investment of fiscal and personnel resources when offering language programs in schools, there is a short-sighted tendency to measure the return on these investments by way of increased student enrollment and, accordingly, average daily attendance (ADA) calculations that contribute to increased funding allocations. Rather, school systems must look beyond business-like structures and build their language programs upon goals that focus on the humanity behind a language and its speakers. Doing otherwise endangers the great potential of language education to foster intercultural respect and communication (Flores & García, 2017), and diminishes its capable teachers into recruitment tools, rather than ambassadors of multilingual appreciation and cultural knowledge. Such considerations are particularly poignant for teachers of Asian languages, whose raciolinguistic features (Flores & Rosa, 2015) and non-Latin writing scripts are markedly distinct from the English hegemonic, normative culture in U.S. schools, contributing to frequent "othering" in educational systems (Bettini et al., 2022). Schools must intentionally attend to the full human worth in their teachers, and not simplify their value as language resources in isolation.

Finally, educators must take care in the implementation of Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs, an increasingly preferred model for multilingual education. This must address the duality of DLI as an avenue for *language acquisition* versus DLI for *heritage maintenance*. The greatest promise of the DLI model is in its ability to create avenues into multilingualism and multiculturalism for all learners (Lindholm-Leary, 2012), while also providing culturally affirming and sustaining experiences for heritage learners (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). Yet, such ideals do not always manifest due to implementation factors or policies in school systems (Wong & Benson, 2019). By design, programs are typically focused on language acquisition, planning heavily for skills and behaviors outlined by domains for language proficiency, such as speaking, reading, and writing. While this is a necessity in language education, the DLI design is incomplete if the program does not address the duality intended by its very name. What if "dual" pushed

beyond the presence of two languages to also affirm dual identities, dual heritages, dual ways of being, and infinite dualities that students could bring to the learning space? As Asian language education grows in popularity and demand, the DLI model has every capability to promise more than language acquisition alone. It is a powerful setting to uplift and include heritage communities who have been otherwise asked to assimilate and acculturate to the dominant norms of the U.S. (Zhou, 1997).

Although walking the line between hopeful shifts and cautionary challenges in Asian dual language education can be precarious, we do note encouraging steps forward, particularly in U.S. states with higher proportions of AAPI communities. For example, California recently allocated \$5 million to California State University's Asian Language Bilingual Teacher Education Program Consortium to recruit and increase the number of bilingual teachers of Asian languages over the next four years (California State Fullerton, 2023). These include bilingual teachers in Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese, Hmong, Korean, and Vietnamese, representing the communities and humanities of the Asian American people instead of commodified languages to teach.

To build capacity and the teacher workforce in Asian language bilingual education, resources need to go beyond pre-service recruitment and training. Ongoing in-service professional development opportunities must support novice to seasoned bilingual teachers in bi/multilingual pedagogy that considers the unique linguistic demands and assets of the Asian languages in bi/multilingual learning environments (Collins et al., 2019; Lin, 2006). Educators and administrators must also engage in continuous, critical conversations about Asian American issues like the racial positioning of AAPI teachers and students as both model minorities and foreigners (Kim & Cooc, 2021; Takaki, 1998). From a systemic point of view, administrators need also to transform teacher workplaces into humanizing environments where Asian language teachers are valued for their craft and expertise and not just for their language (Chan Hill, 2023).

Still, the rising interest in Asian languages has resulted in increased collaborations between administrators, researchers, and practitioners building our knowledge base of key practices and perspectives in Asian language bilingual education (see special issue by Wong & Tian, 2022) along with on-the-grounds networks (e.g., The California Association of Bilingual Education's Asian Languages Network) and programs (e.g., California State University Fullerton's National Resource Center for Asian Languages) that engage teachers of Asian languages in broader communities and conversations, elevate the discourse of Asian language bilingual education, and restore the human-

ity of educators in an otherwise isolating and dehumanizing view of teachers as language resources. With this momentum, we encourage all to join in the work and build coalitions that demand schools reflect the communities they serve, while honoring the humanity of teachers, and walking the fine line with equity-anchored discernment and intention.

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