

**A Book Critique of  
Williams, J. D. & Snipper, G. C. (1990).  
Literacy and Bilingualism. New York : Longman.**

**Reviewed by :**

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I find Literacy and Bilingualism will join other classics in the field of second language acquisition as it provides both broad summaries and detailed elucidation of every important aspect. Although a number of chapters in this volume deal directly with foreign language teaching and learning in the U.S., they are also related to issues and areas in literacy and bilingualism, which can be applied to the current learning situations in both ESL and EFL contexts. In fact, they are important contributions to the growing literature dealing with both language policy and planning studies, and contemporary issues in U.S. foreign language education policy and practice. In short, the book provides significant insights into both language policy studies and the application of language policy and planning in the educational and pedagogical sphere.

In part, the authors address aspects of the bilingualism movement in contemporary American society, dealing with the politics of bilingual education and the English-only (mainstream) movement. They provide a thoughtful analysis of English-only political activism, tracing the history and ideological assumptions of the antibilingual movement from its previous incarnations into the present. They also offer a powerful critique of recent political efforts to challenge the English-only movement. The debate on who will pay for bilingual programs, continues at an intense level with it being centered on the argument that the majority of

Limited-English-Proficiency students are children of unskilled laborers who hold a low status in society. As a result, “they are seen by the majority as making few contributions to the community,” (pp.50-51). From this perspective, language programs for the less commonly taught languages because of low enrollments often need to justify their existence. The statement that “People have equal opportunities in education,” contradicted in its principles with its implementation. “Do we really have equal opportunity?”—I doubt it.

Let’s move on to another issue. The significance of this book can also be seen in its discussion of language transfer. The questions addressed regarding the bilingual education programs in the United States are: a) Should it aim to assimilate non-English speakers into the English-speaking mainstream?; b) Or should it aim to preserve both native language and culture? These questions reflect the issues of practicality, identity and political value. It is claimed in one perspective that in the beginning stages, negative transfer plays a prominent role in the transfer of structural, phonological, and lexical features. Once the second threshold is crossed, multicompetence is attained, and positive transfer of knowledge and pragmatic skills predominates. But what would happen if indeed future research supports the claim that the more distant the L2 from the L1, the stronger the positive effect of learning L2 on the L1?

This would be useful information toward that end. Suppose if that should be the case, I will find the issues on the value of studying a culturally distant language to be especially intriguing.

As a second language learner myself, I strongly encourage in bilingual education and children's second-language acquisition the continued use of L1 as suggested by many researchers. Firstly, for young children, the acquisition process of the second language is faster than adults. They have more opportunities to use the second language, which will finally become the preferred language. Therefore, without continued development in the first language, there is evidence of the language shift and the gradual language loss is likely to take place. The language loss can create a problem in case parents cannot effectively use L2 for communication. That is, what is lost is the ability for parents and children to communicate about the deep and critical experiences of growing up. What the parents have to teach the child and what the child is able to share with the parents are irretrievably lost when their means of communication are lost to them. Secondly, without the use of the native language, it may result in the indirect consequences of the eradication of children's native languages and undermining of cultural identities. In addition, if children are not encouraged to use the native language, it might affect communication

patterns in the homes if parents do not speak L2 well enough to communicate easily. Finally, for young children, exposure to two language systems does not seem to alter the process of linguistic development. In other words, the children go through the same experimentation, construction, invention, and testing as do all children when acquiring one language. In terms of the literacy development, the native language literacy development for bilingual children is beneficial in a number of ways. Many studies have shown that cognitive and academic development in the first language has a strong, positive effect on the second language development for academic purposes. To clarify, academic skills, literacy development, concept formation, subject knowledge, and learning strategies all transfer from L1 to L2 as the vocabulary and communicative patterns are developed in L1 to express that academic knowledge. From the previous studies on bilingual education and children's second-language acquisition, it has been reported that bilingual children younger than six, who have been exposed to two languages, demonstrate the enhanced ability to talk about, analyze, and play with language, compared to monolingual children. Bauer and Montero (2001) suggested that young bilingual children who are immersed in print-rich environments in two languages may develop a keen understanding of the concept of text. To illustrate, they are aware of which aspect of text is tied to the

language and which is not. In addition, the experiences and skills in reading and writing in their home language provide a good foundation for learning to read and write in the second language (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001). Simply put, students who read in their home language already know that print bears a systematic relationship to spoken language, that print carries meaning and that reading and writing can be used for many purposes. Such experience and knowledge will transfer directly to learning to read and write in English, given English language development (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001).

Although not explicitly writing for teachers, the authors' analysis is, in my view, essential background knowledge for any future educator and certainly provides a solid foundation for the development of critical language awareness in the U.S. context. Their arguments are extremely compelling and make clear about the political and ideological nature of educational debates on language, language rights, language policy, and language diversity. That is, the need to recognize the presence and significance of language diversity in educational settings in the United States has become increasingly apparent to educators and educational policy makers in recent years. Although of increasing significance and relevance, it is interesting that relatively few works have sought to target one of the more important audiences

concerned with such debates: future classroom teachers. Issues of language and language diversity are largely absent from the teacher education literature, and preservice teachers are relatively unlikely to be exposed in any significant or in-depth way to such matters in their formal preparation. To me, a major challenge for beginning teachers is to understand how language differences construct and reflect ideologies and power relations, especially through the work that teachers do themselves. Fortunately, the book provides an excellent awareness necessary if they are to meet the needs of their students more adequately.

The volume moves us to the next level of specificity, seeking to directly address future teachers. It provides a broad overview of the various methods currently available for teaching a second language with which teachers should be familiar. Included in the book are chapters dealing with language in social life and education; language, power and social justice in education; bilingual education and English as a Second Language programs; and research methods for language diversity and education. This volume presents a truly outstanding introduction to applied linguistics for teachers. More than this, though, it explicitly makes clear the reasons that issues of language should be of concern to educators: not simply for pedagogical reasons but even more for reasons related to human rights and the quest for justice in

society. Reagan (1997) comments that language, in short, touches every aspect of education, because in schools language is the medium of instruction, it is the content of instruction, and it provides the pedagogical means by which that instruction is realized. More than all of this, beyond school, the life of students are determined by their ability to interact critically with the discourses around them, while still avoiding the temptation to be seduced by the disempowering messages those discourses often contain. The book is cogent and powerful, and addresses central sociolinguistic issues that should be of interest and concern to all educators. There should be little question that a greater understanding of linguistic diversity is of immediate and pressing importance for all classroom teachers, and this book provides an excellent groundwork for the development of that understanding for both preservice and inservice educators.

Beyond that, I feel that the presentation of so many different types of programs needs to be rounded out by a discussion of the theory and research on the development and maintenance of bilingualism. I am looking for the bilingual programs, which are free from politics, but truly and sincerely focus on the

learners' literacy development in racially integrated classrooms located in the multicultural settings on this globe. Finally, I would like to finish with a statement below as it indicates that the significance of bilingualism is seen and there are attempts for ideal foreign language programs.

"It is becoming increasingly more important for American students to know more than one language and that greater collaboration among educators at colleges and universities will not only be beneficial for the programs and their students but will also promote a more language-competent society."

## Reference

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