

Philosophy of bilingual education

[Profession](#), [Teacher](#)



"Philosophy of Bilingual Education" sounds so official, so academic, and a bit intimidating as well. How and when does a teacher form a philosophy of bilingual education? That question has caused me to dig into my past and ponder each of my teaching experiences as well as the opinions of respected loved ones. I have also taken into consideration the philosophies and opinions of other teachers I have known and spoken to on this matter. My Experience Teaching LEP Students After graduating from NMSU with a BS in elementary education, I was ready to stamp out ignorance. I wanted to teach and teach now. Talk about enthusiastic! Fortunately, I got a job immediately after graduation teaching fifth grade. I was thrilled! I felt well-equipped for any challenges I might encounter during this freshman year of teaching... that's what I thought anyway. During the days immediately before classes start, when all of the teachers are looking at their class lists and trying to memorize names, I was told by my principal that I would be teaching a couple of students who had only recently moved to our area from Mexico, and knew only a few words of English. I was shocked! How could I be held accountable for teaching these kids subjects that the state of NM mandated they master, even though I didn't know the language they spoke, and they didn't know the language I spoke? I was the only fifth grade teacher in this small school. Welcome to the world of teaching in America in 1985! As I prepared to teach kids who knew no English, all I could think about was how awful my Spanish was and how terribly disappointed I was that I never learned to speak the language fluently. I definitely knew many Spanish words and phrases, but was far from being fluent. Having been raised by an Anglo, English-only speaking mom, and a Mexican dad, fluent in Spanish,

who spoke in English to my sister, mom, and me, I was frequently exposed to Spanish being spoken around me (when dad conversed with his siblings), but not directly to me. My greatest fear was that my LEP students wouldn't learn what they needed to. I didn't want them to fail. If they failed, it meant I had failed as a teacher! To say I was worried would be a huge understatement. How in the world would I teach these children? How I ended up teaching them was due to much help which came to me in the form of a beautiful, articulate, little girl named Delilah. Delilah was not only a student in my classroom, she was a brilliant student. Truly, the child was incredibly smart, and lucky for me (and my LEP students), Delilah had an Anglo mama who spoke only English and a Mexican daddy whose first and favored language was Spanish. As babies, much of the time Delilah and her siblings were tended to by their paternal grandmother, who spoke only Spanish. At home, mom spoke English to them, so they were inundated by both tongues. Needless to say, these children were thoroughly bilingual. They could read and write exquisitely in both languages. Delilah became my little translator. She was a miniature Spanish-speaking version of me in that classroom. As I taught, she repeated everything I said to the kids who knew no English. It worked wonderfully — a gift from God was how I saw it. The exciting part was, as the year went on, and the LEP kids paid attention to my English instruction day after day, Delilah's translating was not needed as much. They were learning to understand me in English! Was my way of teaching these Spanish-speaking students the best way? I honestly can't say, because I have nothing else, from my own teaching experience, to compare it to. It's not as if I could hit a rewind button and start the year anew for a do-over to

try a different methodology. I do know it was the only way to teach them. There were no special programs for those kids that year, but just a teacher who cared greatly about their education and a peer who translated for them. As a result, they passed the fifth grade and learned lots and lots of English that year. During my tenth year of teaching (years two through nine were spent in monolingual Louisiana schools), I found myself right back at the school where my formal teaching career began, but things had drastically changed since my initial teaching experience there. I team-taught fourth grade, alongside another teacher who spoke fluent Spanish, so students were divided between us based on whether or not they spoke solely Spanish. I was given all of the students who spoke fluent English (though many of them spoke fluent Spanish too), and she was assigned the students who spoke only Spanish. She taught in both languages, while I taught exclusively in English. That was my second experience teaching in a bilingual setting. I had two very different teaching experiences with bilingual education, and yet, I consider both years to have been successful...for both the kids and their teacher. The students learned what they needed to and it showed on their annual state-mandated tests, and I was pleased that I had been able to teach them. The parents of these students were satisfied and the kids had confidence in their ability to learn. Successful indeed!

Daddy and Aunt Bernice's Views To gain other perspectives, I interviewed my dad and his sister, my Aunt Bernice on this topic. In my opinion, they are experts because they both started school in the U. S. when they were five years old, and neither of them could speak any English at the time. I asked both of them these questions, " Are you pleased with how you were taught English

as a second language? Do you think this is how LEP students should be taught today? Why or why not? " Although they were not together when I asked the questions, both gave me almost identical answers. They both stated that they learned English and other subjects by total immersion. There were no special programs, translators, or materials printed in both languages. It was sink or swim, and they both swam (like " Olympic" champs, if you ask me). My Aunt Bernice is a retired bilingual elementary school teacher and my dad retired two years ago after successfully managing a propane company for forty-five years. They both read, write, and speak English and Spanish fluently without any accent, and they both agree that the children today are catered to entirely too much in our public schools. They acknowledge that immersion worked for them and they believe it will work for today's kids as well. As far as their culture, again they are both in agreement. They never lost a sense of who they were as Mexican Americans because their families made sure that didn't happen. Melissa's

Conclusion I'm sure no one would be surprised that my philosophy of bilingual education is to follow the immersion model. It worked for my family members, it worked when my Aunt Bernice taught two fifth grade boys in El Paso, TX who spoke only Chinese at the start of the school year, and it seemed to work for the kids on the Speaking in Tongues video we watched for this class. It may not be the most popular method, but if I were in charge of bilingual education in America, this would be the way our LEP children would be educated.