

# Los Angeles Times

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## **PERSPECTIVE ON BILINGUAL EDUCATION :**

**Assimilation Is More Than ABCs : Immigrant children will be our bridge builders to other cultures. Value their roots; invest in their Americanization.**

By JORGE R. MANCILLAS

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Imagine going from a working-class neighborhood in Ensenada to the University of California at Berkeley. Having graduated from high school with the Mexican equivalent of a 4.0 GPA, having studied English and worked in my hometown's tourist industry, and having passed the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) without difficulties, I sat in my first lecture at Berkeley full of confidence and excitement.

I had just been exposed to the United States' dual immigration policy. For the first time in my life, I had been treated courteously by immigration officials: With a letter of acceptance from one of the world's most prestigious universities, my expected contribution to Mexico's brain drain was greeted with the prompt dispensation of a student visa. Now, sitting in the front row of a large lecture hall, I opened my notebook as the professor began to speak. A few minutes later, I was devastated.

Engaging in conversation with tourists at a hotel desk and passing the TOEFL were quite different from trying to grasp complex concepts in psychology delivered at the pace required by 10-week quarter terms. I was lost. Trying to absorb the material from the 600-page psychology textbook was no easier.

Still, that was the easiest part. I also had to fulfill the English 1A requirement, for which we had to read a text and write a report at the end of each week. Assigned reading for the first two weeks: Theodore Roszak's "The Making of the Counter-Culture" and Norman Mailer's "Miami and the Siege of Chicago." Quite a tall order for a boy who had grown up in Ensenada. It was more than the language that I was "deficient" in; it was the implied understanding of the culture and politics.

Sitting in the back of the classroom, I struggled for two quarters as I had never struggled before in my life, and I barely managed to maintain a C average. My self-esteem was shattered. I forged ahead, however, understanding very well what the educational opportunity that I had before me meant to my future prospects. By the time I graduated, my grade average was up to an A, although my overall average was much lower due to the impact of the first quarters.

Years later, I find myself part of the faculty at the UCLA School of Medicine and the director of a research laboratory affiliated with UCLA's Brain Research Institute. Had I not been able to overcome the hurdles of my first few months at Berkeley, emotional as well as practical--and I almost didn't--my life and any contribution I may be able to make to society would have been very different.

This experience comes to mind when I hear arguments about bilingual education for the substantial proportion of children with limited English proficiency in the Los Angeles Unified School District. It is easy for me to understand the experience of children finding themselves in a new culture, wanting and struggling to master the English language but lagging behind in other subjects while they do. By the time they learn English--and almost invariably they do--they are behind academically, they are left with gaps in their academic development. Even worse, their self-esteem has suffered considerably, for at that tender age, their sense of self-worth is shaped to a large degree by their perception of how they measure up in comparison to, and in the eyes of, their peers.

Why would we want to academically disable and emotionally impair thousands of children instead of providing them with the mechanisms that allow for a healthy transition to their adopted culture?

The Mexican government's recent contribution of school texts and bilingual teachers to the LAUSD was born of compassion for Spanish-speaking children. It also was influenced by the government's intelligent understanding of Mexico's need to respond to ongoing changes in contemporary society; the Mexican educators who will be exposed to the U.S. educational system and culture will be a valuable resource upon returning to their country.

Children with limited English proficiency must be seen, like other children, as a valuable resource, not as a hindrance or a burden. If we help them to integrate successfully into the mainstream while preserving their original language and cultural skills, they will be the bridge-builders this country needs to succeed in the global community.

This is a priceless resource: a new generation of Americans committed to preserving and strengthening a democratic and pluralistic U.S. society, but also having a birthright familiarity with Latin American, Asian or Middle Eastern societies. Think of what these children might contribute in an age of revolutions in communications and development that we, today, can hardly imagine.

Against this possibility, the alternative is ludicrous: to create a large population of school dropouts, hostile to the mythical "mainstream American culture" to which, they are made to feel, they have nothing to contribute because they are culturally and linguistically deficient.

Those who oppose bilingual education are propelled more by fear of others and insecurity about their own capabilities, identity and culture. To follow them is to go against the current of history and embark on a futile attempt to become culturally insular and ethnically "clean." Our only other choice is to embrace change and learn the value of diverse expressions of the human experience as a strong basis for our place in the global society of the 21st Century. From that perspective, the monetary cost of bilingual education is trivial and a sound investment in the future.

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