

Monolingualism is bad for the economy



In most countries of immigration, linguistic diversity is by and large ignored by policy makers. If there are language-related policies, they take a deficit view of migrants and their children and focus on improving their English (or whatever the national language may be). Many people resent even the meagre efforts that states are making to help migrants and their children learn the dominant language, and ESL provision in schools is a ready target for funding cuts, [as is currently the case in NSW](#). Going beyond ESL provision and investing into meaningful bilingual education that would enable migrant children to reach high levels of bilingual proficiency in both their heritage language and the dominant language are, by and large, unheard of. Usually, ensuring bilingual proficiency is the exclusive responsibility of parents and thus the usual vagaries of luck and privilege apply.

Bilingual provision in schools that would allow children to reach high levels of proficiency in two or more languages is widely seen as located in the “nice to have but expensive”-basket. In an environment where ESL provision is often considered expendable, bilingual provision may seem like utopian bells and whistles that we simply cannot afford. Linguists and educators have long pointed out the educational, cognitive and psycho-social benefits of bilingualism and have argued that achieving high-level proficiency in both the heritage language and the dominant language is good for the social fabric of a diverse society. However, such non-quantifiables without an immediate dollar-value usually cut no ice with hard-nosed budget planners and the proponents of bilingual education are mostly simply ignored as idealistic dreamers.

Well, it turns out the proponents of bilingual education have much more good economic sense than your average monolingual policy wonk.

A recent study by [Orhan Agirdag](#) published in the [International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism](#) investigates the earnings of second generation migrants relative to their level of bilingual proficiency. Re-examining data from two large-scale longitudinal studies conducted between 1988 and 2003 in the USA, the author analysed the linguistic proficiency and earnings of 3,553 individuals. These individuals were either born to at least one migrant parent or came to the USA at a young age. In the early 2000s, they were in their mid-20s.

On the basis of participants' self-reported proficiency data, the author identified three groups:

- High-level bilinguals, who had high levels of proficiency, crucially including the ability to read and write, in both English and their heritage language
- Low-level bilinguals, who had low levels of proficiency in both English and their heritage language
- English-dominant, who had high levels of proficiency in English but low levels of proficiency in their heritage language (or no proficiency at all)

No one will be surprised to learn that the English-dominant accounted for more than half of the participants, as that is what the US school system (as most others) is designed to achieve. With a bit over 20%, the numbers of low-level bilinguals are also unsurprising: these are the young adults who would have needed special ESL provision in school but presumably didn't get it; while unsurprising, it is disturbing to see that more than 20% of migrant kids can go through their entire schooling career in the US without achieving adequate proficiency in English. The percentage of high-level bilinguals in the sample is very similar to that of low-level bilinguals (ca. 22%). These are the lucky kids who either lived within the catchment area of a bilingual immersion program or whose parents put in the effort of teach them how to read and write the heritage language after school and on the weekends.

Now which of these three groups do you think earned the most? According to the logic of the education system, it should be the English-dominant kids who fare best in the labour market. Well, they don't!

High-level bilingualism was robustly associated with higher earnings of around \$3,000 per year and the effect held even if other variables that are known to influence earnings were controlled for (e.g., gender, parental socio-economic status, educational achievement). The effect also held across language groups, even if some languages were more valuable than others (e.g., Chinese-Americans were found to earn more than other migrant groups but within the group of Chinese-Americans those with high-level bilingual proficiency earned more than those who were English-dominant or those who had low-level bilingual proficiency). Interestingly, when other variables were controlled, there was no earnings difference between those who were English-dominant and those who were low-level bilinguals.

Higher earnings of \$3,000 per year when everything else is kept constant are a sizable effect. Additionally, the actual financial advantage of high-level bilingualism is likely to be higher due to indirect effects which are obscured by keeping other variables constant such as the link between high-level bilingualism and educational achievement (i.e. high-level bilinguals are more likely to achieve high levels of education and thus they have a compounded earnings advantage).

We all know that imposing English monolingualism on migrant children is bad for them educationally, cognitively and socio-psychologically. Thanks to Agirdag's research, we now also know that it is bad for them economically. Beyond the economic disadvantage suffered by individuals who have been forced into linguistic assimilation, their linguistic assimilation through the education system is bad for the economy and thus for everyone: decreasing the earning potential of second-generation migrants through linguistic assimilation will, inter alia, lower the tax base and increase the demand for social services. Conversely, those who earn more, spend more.

Bilingualism has these earnings benefits because high-level bilinguals can access two labour markets: the mainstream labour market and the ethnic labour market. My guess is that the labour market advantages of high-level bilingualism are likely to further increase in the future: as the global economy becomes ever more connected, multilingual proficiencies will become ever more central to labour mobility.

In sum, bilingual education is good for the economy. It's high time our leaders did their sums and showed some good business sense!



Orhan Agirdag (2013). The long-term effects of bilingualism on children of immigration: student bilingualism and future earnings International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2013.816264](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2013.816264)