

English-Portuguese Bilingual Education in Brazil: An Analysis of the Main Themes in Research

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Abstract

This study aims to provide an overview of the themes related to bilingual education present in articles, dissertations, and theses published in the last eleven years in Brazil. For this paper, notions of bilingualism and bilingual education were mainly adopted from the works of Hamers and Blanc and García. A survey was carried out on two different Brazilian government websites in order to collect samples of abstracts in the field of bilingual education and determine their themes. From a qualitative-interpretive paradigm, a thematic analysis was conducted as the main method of research. The main themes were identified from the abstracts and divided into six categories. The variety of themes showed the diversity of research in Brazil. Moreover, it was hypothesized that the number of studies related to English-Portuguese bilingual education is likely to increase, especially in the field of language policy, due to a recently approved legislation.

Keywords: bilingual education; bilingualism; English-Portuguese.

1. Introduction

It is safe to assume that most Brazilians believe they live in a monolingual country. Even though Brazil has only one official language – Portuguese – Maher (2013) points out that there are over 200 (two hundred) languages being spoken as mother tongues by Brazilians. The myth of a monolingual country (CAVALCANTI, 1999) has caused many minority languages to struggle to survive and stay relevant in their communities. Hence, studies in bilingualism and bilingual education have the potential to shine a light on these important issues. It is also worth mentioning, that given the characteristics of the researches that will be discussed here, as well as the types of schools that are the focus of our concern, the term “bilingual” will be adopted in this paper as a more suitable choice, instead of “plurilingual” or “multilingual”.

Despite the language plurality present in Brazil, there is a noticeable overvaluation of English, perceived by many of this country’s citizens as a prestigious language, necessary to ascend socially and achieve economic growth in today’s globalized world. For this reason, the present study will focus on one aspect of bilingual education: the use of English (foreign language) and Portuguese (native language) as means of instruction in our schools. Since we did not find any work on the state of the art on the topic of English-Portuguese bilingual education, our goal is to fill this gap and provide an overview of what has been researched in Brazil.

In 2020, the Brazilian government attempts to solve the problem of a previous lack of regulation for bilingual education by approving the National Curriculum Guidelines for Plurilingual Education (BRASIL, 2020). This recent language policy is expected to have a great impact on bilingual education in Brazil. According to this document, schools that wish to be considered bilingual must adhere to a series of regulations, such as the number of hours the foreign language is supposed to be used in class, the use of foreign language as means of instruction in different disciplines, specific demands related to teachers’ education, the assessment of students’ foreign language proficiency, among others. January of 2023 was set as the deadline for bilingual schools to present a political pedagogical project in compliance with this new language policy, or they will not be allowed to call themselves bilingual schools anymore.

The formulation of this national guideline was a response to the growing number of self-called English-Portuguese bilingual schools, especially in the private sector. Megale (2014) draws attention to how the lack of nationwide regulation for bilingual education in Brazil, at the time, caused misinterpretations of what a bilingual school should be. A large number of private schools were using bilingual education as a marketing tool. These schools would simply call themselves “bilingual schools” to lure more students interested in learning English, even though what they offered was not always bilingual education *per se*, but rather an increase in the hours spent teaching English as a subject.

This behavior adopted by Brazilian schools portrays how bilingual education is perceived in the country and how different it can be compared to other nations, for example, the United States. Whereas in Brazil learning a foreign language is desirable and sought after, especially by the elite (MEGALE, 2018), in the USA bilingual education is

often seen as problematic, as if foreign languages are a threat to English. García (2009, p. 279) points out that “at the national level, anti-bilingual sentiment is running high, tied to anti-immigrant efforts”.

Spolsky (2009) argues that different beliefs towards certain languages and varieties can impact language practices and how they are taught. That is why more research is necessary to understand the specificities of local contexts and provide a broader view of what bilingual education can be.

The present research aims to provide an analysis of the most recurrent themes in scientific articles, dissertations, and theses of the last 11 years (from 2012 to 2022) from the field of bilingual education. By categorizing the core themes from bilingual education research, we will be able to find out what issues seem more relevant for Brazilian researchers and what themes perhaps need more investigating.

In the next part, the article will discuss some of the notions of bilingualism and bilingual education present in the literature. Then, it will describe the methodology adopted for the research, followed by an analysis of the results of the data collection. Finally, the conclusion will contribute with suggestions for future research.

2. Bilingualism And Bilingual Education

Before delving into bilingual education, which is the main focus of our research, it is imperative to explore the concept of bilingualism. The definitions given to this elusive term have been manifold throughout the literature. The papers analyzed in this research, for example, showcase a variety of authors whose definitions of bilingualism range from one-dimensional to multidimensional.

From a one-dimensional perspective, Bloomfield (1935, p. 56) claimed that bilingualism takes place when a foreign language is learned without the loss of the native language, resulting in a “native-like control of two languages”. In contrast, Macnamara (1967) argued that having minimal competence in at least one of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) would suffice to consider someone bilingual. Even though these definitions are in opposition to each other, they both reduce bilingualism to its linguistic aspect only. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that this is not a criticism of these authors, who were one of the first ones to try to define bilingualism and certainly paved the way for many linguists who followed.

Hamers and Blanc (2000), on the other hand, maintain that bilingualism is a multidimensional phenomenon and that it should be investigated as such. According to the authors, psychological and sociological dimensions must be taken into account. They identified six relevant dimensions: relative competence, cognitive organization, age of acquisition, exogeneity, social cultural status, and cultural identity. Similarly, Valdés and Figueroa (1994) suggest bilinguals should be classified considering these five dimensions: age, ability, balance of two languages, development, and context. We believe these multidimensional perspectives provide a more comprehensive view of what bilingualism is while encompassing all of its complexity.

Given the context of this research, one other type of bilingualism is worth mentioning: elective bilingual. Often associated with the elite or the language majority groups, elective bilinguals are individuals who choose to become bilingual by learning a foreign language. According to Baker (2001), elective bilingualism raises important questions related to status and power. Elective bilinguals describe most of the participants in the papers from our survey, who often choose to learn English in hopes of finding more opportunities for economic growth in the future.

In regards to the definition of bilingual education, García (2009, pg. 30) states that:

Bilingual education, for us, is simply any instance in which children’s and teachers’ communicative practices in school normally include the use of multiple multilingual practices that maximize learning efficacy and communication; and that, in doing so, foster and develop tolerance towards linguistic differences, as well as appreciation of language and bilingual proficiency.

Hamers and Blanc (2000, p. 321) define bilingual education as “any system of school education in which, at a given moment in time and for a varying amount of time, simultaneously or consecutively, instruction is planned and given in at least two languages”. We noticed that the concept of bilingualism differs greatly among many authors, whereas the definitions of bilingual education seem to have more congruence. Clearly an increase in time teaching a foreign language as a subject is not what constitutes bilingual education. Most researchers agree that the foreign language must be used as a medium of instruction. However, questions of when, how often, or to what purpose use this language can provide different answers, which lead to various types of bilingual education.

Since individuals, communities, and countries have their own specific goals, needs, resources, culture, and historical backgrounds, it is only natural that bilingualism and bilingual education take different shapes and forms. Fishman and Lovas (1970), for example, adopt a sociolinguistic perspective and divide bilingual education according to three variables: intensity (transitional bilingualism, monoliterate bilingualism, partial biliterate bilingualism, total biliterate bilingualism), goal (compensatory programs, enrichment programs, group-maintenance programs) and status (language of primary importance vs. language of secondary importance in education, home

language vs. school language, major world language vs. minor language, institutionalized language vs. non-institutionalized language in the community). Hamers and Blanc (2000),

However, criticized this classification for its lack of theoretical foundations and disregard for certain social, cultural, and psychological aspects. They drew attention to the fact that only an interdisciplinary approach would be appropriate to classify bilingual education.

García (2009) advocates for bilingual education as the only way to teach in the twenty-first century while providing comprehensive analyses and examples of multiple types of bilingual education used worldwide. García has the types of bilingual education placed into four different theoretical frameworks: subtractive, additive, recursive, and dynamic. In a subtractive framework, the more powerful language is used for instruction in hopes of promoting a language shift, and eventual abandonment of the student's first language. In this case, bilingualism is often seen as a problem that needs solving and monolingualism is the goal. An additive framework, often found in prestigious groups and elite education, views bilingualism as an enrichment possibility, in which students are expected to add a second language to their linguistic repertoire. However, monoculturalism is still encouraged for language majorities. As for a recursive framework, schools acknowledge the complexity of sociohistorical factors as they attempt to protect language minorities and their cultures while promoting language revitalization. Finally, a dynamic framework understands bilingualism as a resource, as it stimulates the coexistence of different languages and creates a suitable environment for hybrid cultural experiences. García argues that a dynamic framework would be beneficial for the learning process by allowing translanguaging to take place, which is defined as "multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds" (p. 78).

Given the limited space of the article, as well as the goal we set out for our research, we will not discuss in detail all the types of bilingual education found in the literature. Nonetheless, we believe this review of the definitions of both bilingualism and bilingual education was necessary to allow for a better understanding of the results and analyses.

3. Methodology

We adopted a thematic analysis as the main method of this qualitative-interpretive research (BROWN, 2004). Defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data", a thematic analysis proves suitable for the goals of our paper, as it can summarize key aspects of research in the field of bilingual education, as well as produce unanticipated insights. In order to capture the most prevalent aspect of the research and assign it to a specific theme, we searched for repeated patterns within the data collected.

A survey was carried out on Capes (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel) and BDTD (Digital Library for Theses and Dissertations), two websites created by the Brazilian government that store articles and dissertations/theses, respectively. To narrow down our search and find the most suitable abstracts, we used the following descriptors: "bilingual education" + "English", "bilingual teaching" + "English" and "bilingual school" + "English". As a result, a total of 188 (one hundred and eighty-eight) studies, among articles, dissertations, and theses from the last 11 years (2012-2022) were found. After a closer look at the abstracts, we identified that 92 (ninety-two) actually tackled issues related to English-Portuguese bilingual education in Brazil, which will be discussed in the next part.

4. Results and Analysis

Based on the analysis of the abstracts from the papers collected, 6 (six) themes stood out and were divided into the following categories: beliefs, culture and identity, second language acquisition and skills, language policies, approaches and methods, and principles and practices related to bilingual education. The number of dissertations, theses, and scientific articles found is shown below in Table 1.

TABLE 1 – Main themes present in bilingual education in Brazil

Main themes	Theses and dissertations	Articles	Total
Beliefs	9	2	11
Culture and identity	10	1	11
L2 acquisition and skills	7	4	11
Language policies	4	4	8
Approaches and methods	19	4	23
Principles and practices	12	2	14
Others	10	4	14
TOTAL	74	22	92

In the category "Beliefs", studies investigate how teachers perceive the impacts of bilingual education on their practices, what they believe are the benefits of this type of education, and what they consider most challenging.

Researchers also investigated the beliefs of students and their families related to motivation and expectation of bilingual education. The following excerpt shows how the research looked into the beliefs of parents and families when it comes to choosing a school for their children:

The objective of this research was to understand family expectations regarding bilingual schooling. More specifically, it sought to analyze the reasons and motivations that have led fathers and mothers to enroll their children in schools that offer bilingual education, including understanding the relationship between this choice and expectations regarding their careers. (VIEIRA, 2019, p. 07)

Other excerpts below illustrate how some of the papers addressed this theme:

the focus of the investigation presented some of the beliefs that undergraduate students of Modern Language (Portuguese/English) have on bilingualism, and consequently on bilingual education, since the beliefs can also be considered as a social concept, and not only cognitive, as they are born from experiences and problems, from the interaction with the context and from our ability to reflect and think about surrounds us. (MICHELI, 2020, p. 08)

we seek to investigate the perception of the teachers about the recent bilingual programs in private schools in Fortaleza, [...] and assess whether teachers perceive bilingual programs as beneficial to them. (ANA; TOASSI, 2020, p. 102)

Understanding how teachers and students feel about bilingual education is an essential step towards improvements in this type of education. Since “language cannot be divorced from the context in which it is used”, as stated by Baker (2001, p. 12), the voices of these agents need to be heard for us to comprehend the specific challenges of each local context. It can be argued that the success or failure of bilingual education will be influenced by how a foreign language is perceived by the people involved in the teaching-learning process.

In the next category, the papers address the themes of culture and identity primarily. We were able to identify identity formation as a major concern in some of these studies, as it is seen in the following excerpt: “This research aims at investigating the possible implications of relation between first and second languages in the process of identity formation of educators and students in Brazilian Portuguese-English bilingual schools” (FRIMM, 2020, p. 12). The same theme is found in another abstract: “The data analysis focuses on the (re)configuration of professional identities; the construction of sociocultural identities and the positionings towards the new international curriculum” (GONÇALVES, 2013, p. 07). García (2009, p. 133) claims the theme of identity is “the most important concept in bilingual education” and it has great impact on the students’ willingness to learn. Therefore, schools and teachers must be aware of the complexity that involves identity and language in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of their learners.

Some of the abstracts in this category, on the other hand, chose to emphasize the cultural aspect of bilingual education and how it may influence identity formation and the process of language teaching and learning. The theme of culture is observed in this excerpt: “The cultural traits of Portuguese and English in the interactions in the classroom were also analyzed in order to perceive instances of interculturality in the process of bilingual education” (GOMIDES, 2018, p. 15). The excerpt below shows how the theme of culture and identity are intrinsically related, which explains why they were not separated into two different categories:

The purpose of the research described in this thesis was to analyze some oral interactions among Brazilian bilingual teenagers and two of their teachers in educational contexts where English was taught as a Foreign Language (henceforth FL) and investigate how these participants disclose features of their Brazilianness in their utterances. (CAMARGO, 2014, p. 15)

Bilingual students must not feel as if their culture is being threatened or is less important, which could lead to deculturation (Hamers; Blanc, 2000). In a dynamic bilingual education, for example, we have the addition, not a replacement, of a second language *and* culture. Bilingual education should foster confidence in the students’ own cultural identity. This concern is present in most papers from this category.

The studies found in the category of “Second language acquisition and skills” focus on aspects of how bilingual education affects second language acquisition and/or how at least one of the four main skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) can be developed. The following excerpt shows interest in the theme of literacy and early childhood learning: “The main goal of this research was to examine the teaching-learning/acquisition process of the English language as a foreign language for students in kindergarten (2-3 years old) and the first two years of elementary school (7-8 years old)” (OYA, 2017, p. 06). The theme is also present in the next example:

Partial results indicate that literacy takes place in both languages simultaneously. Pupils who are taught in both languages start thinking in both languages and the immersion experienced in the bilingual school enhances the social interactional process. Children switching back and forth from Portuguese to a second language practically seamlessly, adopting both languages as natural forms of communication. (GUARDA, 2019, p. 08)

All the researchers that investigated second language acquisition analyzed either children or young teenagers. However, it is worth noting that language acquisition concerning the age of the learner is dependent on different factors. García (2009) opposes the myth that children are more likely to learn a foreign language than adults simply because of their age. The author points out that time spent immersed in meaningful contexts of language practice might be one of the reasons children learn faster.

Other papers in this category emphasized the teaching-learning process of specific skills. This excerpt exemplifies the concern some researchers had with how writing is developed by students in bilingual schools: “Specifically, the current research aimed to tackle the question of whether writing instruction in L2 English has any effect on the L1 writing of Portuguese native-speaking children” (PALMA, 2017, p. 08).

In regards to the next category, García (2009, p. 135) argues that “all bilingual education is an instance of language policy in education”. And even though issues related to language policies and planning are of great importance to any type of education, the theme of “Language policies” had the least entries out of the six categories. Examples of how this theme was approached by Brazilian papers are shown in the excerpts below:

This research, of bibliographic and documentary character, aims at clarifying if and how the Brazilian Base Nacional Common Curricular (BNCC) addresses the themes of bilingualism, additional language reading and reading strategies in the body of the document. (ROSSO; FONTES, 2021, p. 02)

Discourses about elite bilingual education, present in official language policies as well as in language policies developed by other social actors, carry language ideologies that can guide parents in choosing the type of bilingual education for their children. The research reported herein was developed within the field of Applied Linguistics and sought to investigate the existing language policies in the context of elite bilingual education. (MULON, 2017, p. 09)

The BNCC document, mentioned in the first excerpt, is an example of a top-down language policy in Brazil with guidelines for schools to follow from early childhood education to the end of secondary education. This policy was designed “outside the context in which the language policy is interpreted and appropriated” (JOHNSON, 2013, p. 191), in other words, at a macro level. Language policies, such as BNCC, are explicit attempts to influence language practices and beliefs (SPOLSKY, 2009). Most studies in this category focused their analyses on the language policies themselves. However, there seems to be a lack of research on how teachers behave as policy-makers, responsible for the interpretation and appropriation of these macro-level policies.

None of the papers from this category addressed the National Curriculum Guidelines for Plurilingual Education. Given its recent approval, there is still a need to analyze its practical impacts in schools and verify if this language policy will be a turning point in bilingual education in the country.

During our research, the theme “Approaches and methods” had the most entries. A majority of the papers in this category explore, in at least some capacity, the following three language teaching methodologies: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Multiliteracies, and the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). As an example of a paper that addressed Multiliteracies, we can highlight the following excerpt: “this research seeks to understand the main conceptions of Multiliteracies in Brazil, and how they are worked in the context of prestigious bilingual schools” (CAMARGO, 2021, p. 08). The excerpt below exemplifies the use of ICT in a bilingual public school:

This action research aims to present and discuss, from the perception of the participants (students and teacher-researcher), the contributions and limitations of using educational websites that use song lyrics to promote motivation and the development of students’ language competence. In addition, this work aims to observe how the sites can be used as online assistance to face-to-face English-language teaching in a bilingual public school (OLIVEIRA, 2017, p. 09)

As for CLIL, García (2009, p. 299) defines it as “an umbrella term that embraces any type of program where a second language is used to teach non-linguistic content-matter”. When adopting CLIL, English is no longer studied as a subject, but it is rather used as a means to learn different disciplines, such as Math or Science. Consequently, this approach is often favored in bilingual education. An example of research that focused on this approach is seen in this excerpt:

The research questions that guide the study are “what are the possibilities and limitations of using the CLIL approach in early childhood education and what are appropriations of a teacher/researcher in this approach to select, elaborate, adapt, implement and evaluate activities based on the CLIL approach” (NEGOCEKI, 2018, p. 08)

Based on the studies in this category, we observe a plurality of methodologies being used to promote bilingual education. Researchers show concern with how English and Portuguese are being used by teachers and students in the classroom, as well as how different approaches might hinder or strengthen the learning process.

In the category “Principles and practices”, the papers investigate the theoretical foundations of bilingual education and/or how bilingual education practices are performed in specific schools or classrooms. The following excerpt represents the concern many researchers had with the principles that guide bilingual education in Brazilian schools: In order to investigate which conception of bilingualism permeates bilingual education proposal of schools that call themselves bilingual in a city in the northeastern state of São Paulo, this research, qualitative and documentary nature, was held. For this objective to be achieved, we sought the political-pedagogical projects schools that agreed to participate, to identify the elements of the documents, understand that the theoretical perspectives (language/education) the structure and analyze how these schools conceive the bilingual student (MIZUKAMI, 2020, p. 08)

Through an ethnographic perspective, the next excerpt shows an example of research that focuses on the practices of both teachers and students: “this qualitative and interpretivist study is aimed at increasing the knowledge about language practices of students and teachers in bilingual education classrooms” (CARDOSO, 2015, p. 09). This other excerpt exemplifies a study on the theme of principles and practices while recognizing the recent popularization of bilingual education in the country:

In the last few years, we have seen an increase in the number of bilingual schools in Brazil, mainly elite bilingual schools, and currently also public schools have been offering Bilingual Education. In this context, we visited a public elementary school with bilingual education in the early years to understand the concept of bilingualism practiced at school by its teachers and agents involved in bilingual education (SILVA, 2021, p. 08)

We have observed how these papers show great interest in how bilingual education is conceptualized, the need to understand the principles that guide this type of education, and how teachers apply these principles in their daily practices. Studies such as these need to continue taking place throughout the country, in order to provide a clearer understanding of what it means to teach bilingual education while intertwining theory and practice.

During the data analysis, we also created the category “Others”, in which the selected papers proved to be more challenging to fit into one specific theme. Another reason for this category is that some issues discussed in these papers occurred too sparingly to justify a separate category. An example of a sub-theme from “Others” would be “teacher education”. This sub-theme can be seen in the following excerpt: “the main goal of this research is to understand how the learning process of professionals who teach in bilingual education institutions has taken place and how this training influences their pedagogical performance” (SANTO, 2019, p. 08).

We hypothesize that studies related to this sub-theme will likely increase as the National Curriculum Guidelines for Plurilingual Education set specific goals for teacher education, such as proof of linguistic competence and formal education in bilingual studies. In addition to these demands, Megale (2018) also argues that teachers who wish to work in bilingual schools need to acquire knowledge in regards to cultural plurality, first and second language acquisition, curriculum design, theories and models of bilingual education, among many other aspects.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This paper aimed to present an overview of the main themes researched in Brazil over the last 11 years (2012-2022) in the field of bilingual education. A survey was carried out to find articles, dissertations, and theses that addressed this topic. After the data was collected, a thematic analysis was conducted on the abstract of 92 (ninety-two) studies related to English-Portuguese bilingual education. Six different recurrent themes were identified: beliefs, culture and identity, second language acquisition and skills, language policies, approaches and methods, and principles and practices related to bilingual education.

A wide variety of topics were identified in the abstracts, which showed how researchers’ interests related to bilingual education are manifold. For such an important and relevant aspect of education in the twenty-first century, we believe the number of works on this topic should increase, especially due to the popularity of bilingual schools throughout the country and the recently approved legislation. We also highly recommend that more research is developed in Brazil in order to compare with what is being done internationally.

Bilingual education models used throughout the world, even successful ones, should not simply be imported to another context and expected to have the same results. García (2009) draws attention to the danger of importing bilingual education models that may have no relevance to a specific context. Since there is no single ideal model for bilingual education, new ways of teaching students to become bilinguals will have to be designed. We expect to see new types of bilingual education approaches at our disposal to be adopted and adapted after schools create their own models, set up for their specific local context and take into account many different variables, such as objectives, students, teachers, structure, materials, and policies.

In regards to language policy, the results indicated few and far between studies on this specific theme. McCarthy (2011, p. xii) addresses the importance of language policy when she mentions that “policy is not a disembodied thing, but rather a situated sociocultural process – the complex of practices, ideologies, attitudes, and formal and informal mechanisms that influence people’s language choices in profound and pervasive everyday ways”.

Therefore, language policy is not just a product, but rather a process. We argue that this process requires constant investigation.

After the recent approval of the National Curriculum Guidelines for Plurilingual Education, studies related to language policies become even more significant. From this document, new questions related to bilingual education may be raised, for example: how are schools adapting to fit its criteria? How are teachers interpreting and appropriating this language policy to their practices? What are the impacts on the students' foreign language performance? What are the challenges imposed by the policy? The answers to these questions should indicate some of the effects of "real language policy" (SHOHAMY, 2005, p. 46) in bilingual education research in Brazil.

Another issue that raised our attention was the low number of studies that took place in bilingual public schools, only nine out of the 92 (ninety-two) studies. There is still much to be explored regarding prestige language teaching in bilingual schools, especially those that are targeted at underprivileged students instead of the so-called elite. By giving underprivileged students access to a language of power, they can gain cultural and symbolic capital (BOURDIEU, 1991). Cooper (1989, p. 184), for example, has insisted that "if language planning serves the elite and the counterelites, it may also serve the mass, particularly insofar as it strengthens the individual's sense of dignity, self-worth, social connectedness, and ultimate meaning as a member of a group linked both to the past and to the future". To sum up, these students' voices need to be heard and their expectations need to be understood. Only then will suitable bilingual approaches be developed.

We believe our work allowed for a better understanding of the current state of research on bilingual education in Brazil. Similar to the rest of the world, the field of bilingual education studies seems to be growing in the country and it is our hope to help future researchers identify which areas need further investigation.

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