



A LOVE-HATE AFFAIR WITH LANGUAGE

By Rafael Heller | Jan 27, 2020 | Editor's Note

It’s a bit of a cliché to compare the history of education reforms to the movement of a pendulum, but there’s no better way to describe educators’ long-standing debates about children’s language development. Consider, for example, the endless repetition of the same few arguments about how best to teach reading in the early grades: Today (as [George Hruby](#) explains in this issue of Kappan), intensive phonics instruction appears to be on one of its periodic upswings, while schools neglect other kinds of language development. Tomorrow, no doubt, momentum will begin to shift back toward whole language, while advocates of “balanced literacy” will try for the umpteenth time to catch the pendulum at its midpoint and hold it in place.

Or consider the rising, falling, and once again rising fortunes of bilingual education in California. As [Amaya García](#) recounts in these pages, 61% of the state’s voters favored the 1998 ballot initiative that killed off an earlier generation of bilingual programs; by 2016, however, the pendulum had swung the other way, with 71% voting to repeal the earlier bill and invest in new programs.

Or consider similar patterns of debate around foreign language instruction in K-12 education. Looking back to see how Kappan authors addressed this topic in previous decades (dating to the 1930s), [Teresa Preston](#) finds that the key arguments haven’t evolved so much as echoed down the years: Is foreign language learning an individual benefit or a national imperative? Should it be treated as a core subject area or an elective? Should students be immersed in using a new language or given systematic instruction in its formal structures?

Americans have always had (and probably always will have) a conflicted relationship with the languages we speak. We spend millions of dollars on apps to help us learn new languages, but we pass English-only laws and berate people for speaking Spanish in public. We take great pride in our regional dialects, but we worry that they make us sound uneducated. Our population boasts speakers of hundreds of languages, but many, if not most, of us are stubbornly monolingual.

And yet, though we may be destined to keep fighting the same fights, we also keep learning new things about language and bringing new information to bear upon our perpetual reading wars, battles over bilingual education, and conflicts over foreign language instruction. For instance, and as [Carrie Holmberg](#) and [Jamaal Muwakkil](#) describe, linguistic research has provided increasingly fine-grained insights into the subtle, split-second decisions that allow students to participate effectively in classroom conversations. As [Bruce Torff](#) and [Audrey Figueroa Murphy](#) have found, even bilingual educators tend to hold unconscious biases about the academic capacity of English learners. And as [Emily Phillips Galloway](#) explains, we have only just begun to pinpoint the range of skills that allow middle and high school students to comprehend high-level academic texts.

The phrase “Watch your language!” can be an admonition, notes the sociolinguist [Betsy Rymes](#) in her article. But, she adds, it can also be an invitation to pay close attention to our words and the differing ways we use them with our friends, peers, students, strangers, and others. In this issue of Kappan, we invite readers to watch their and others’ language with this same spirit of curiosity, ready to learn more about how language works and how best to share that knowledge with students.

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