

**Chapter 15:
Bilingual Onions**



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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**Special Edition Serial Release
for IDRA's 50th Anniversary**

Chapter 15: Bilingual Onions

During the past 25 years, I have had ample opportunity to visit bilingual education programs throughout the country. My most traumatic observation was in a school district in West Texas in the late 1970s.

Visiting in the school district on school finance matters, the superintendent of schools and several board members asked me to observe their bilingual program. In the company of assistant superintendents for elementary schools, instruction, special programs and the director of bilingual education I visited a bilingual first grade class.

The class of some 24 Hispanic limited-English-proficient kids was divided into two groups. In one corner, the teacher was conducting a Spanish language development activity with about 12 students. Diagonally across the room in another corner, the teacher aide was conducting a similar English language development activity.

The teacher was blond, blue-eyed and obviously had little, if any, facility in the Spanish language she was using. Pointing to a picture of an onion in a large chart she stated, "*Esta es una cebolla* [this is an onion]." Except that the way she pronounced the words it sounded more like, "*Estáy ace iúna sebóla.*" The kids then repeated the sentence, "*Estay es iuna sebola.*"

The teacher then flipped the chart to a picture of a radish and modeled, "*Estay ace iun rabáno.*" She then had the kids repeat it several times.

Meanwhile the obviously Hispanic teacher aide with dark eyes, jet black hair and dark complexion was using an identical chart. She said, "These are onions," but it sounded more like "*Dese or oñons,*" which the kids repeated. With the next picture the teacher aide said, "*Dese or radiches,*" which the kids also repeated. A little later she pointed to a picture of a coconut and said, "*Dese or cacanuts.*"

I didn't stay very long in the classroom, but when I walked out there were half a dozen district administrators anxiously awaiting my reaction to the bilingual program.

"What do you think?" the assistant superintendent asked.

"I think it is an admirable effort in responding to the language needs of children," I replied. "But let me ask an important question. Why don't you have the English-speaking teacher present the English-language activity and the Spanish-speaking aide present the Spanish activity?"

“It’s interesting that you bring this up because that’s the way we used to do it. However, on our last monitoring visit from the state education agency, the program officer noted that the teacher is being paid from a Title VII bilingual grant and therefore has to teach the Spanish lesson, and the teacher aide is being paid from our Title I grant and therefore cannot be allowed to teach in the Spanish language.”

Stunned as I was, I had the presence of mind to ask, “Did you get this criticism in writing?”

“Yes sir, we sure did.”

Before I left the district, I had a copy of the monitoring visit report from the State Department of Education specifying which language each of the two instructors could use in keeping with their source of pay, rather than their language proficiency.

As I was leaving, I was asked one more question. “What do you think we should do?”

Without hesitation I responded, “Have the English-speaking teacher teach in English, the Spanish-speaking aide teach in Spanish, and lie like hell to the State Department of Education.”