On Friday, November 19, UTSA’s Department of Bicultural-Bilingual Studies and the East Asia Institute jointly hosted a free public screening of Speaking in Tongues, a documentary on bilingual education in the United States. The screening was preceded by a Community Cultural Organizations Fair in which eight groups spread awareness about their culture and language programs via information booths. The organizations included UTSA’s Bicultural-Bilingual Studies, Confucius Institute, East Asia Institute and Modern Languages and Literatures. The Chinese Culture Institute of San Antonio, Japan America Society of San Antonio, Korean American Society of San Antonio and Kuest Haus (German school) from the community also hosted a booth at the fair. Over ninety people attended the free screening of the documentary.

The documentary discussed bilingual education, following four San Francisco schoolchildren who were all in language immersion programs. These programs have one teacher who teaches an elective language while another teacher continues to teach the students in English. This allows a child to learn two languages simultaneously. One of the main concerns of parents is that such a multilingual environment may...
compromise the child’s English-speaking abilities. However, studies show that bilingualism enriches the learning experience. The peak time for learning languages is before a child reaches age thirteen.

Durrell, a kindergartener, was in a Mandarin immersion program. His parents were very supportive and were surprised that their child was the only one in their neighborhood to enter the program. They feel that bilingualism is a great asset and that everyone should know multiple languages. They hope that learning Mandarin will open up many opportunities in his future.

An eighth grader named Julian was also in a Mandarin immersion program. He hopes that he can use Mandarin in the future as an aerospace engineer. His school held a program in which the students hosted a visiting Mandarin student. The student he was paired with, Yang Bo, could speak English. They found that they had a great deal in common, despite coming from different countries.

Jason, a fifth grader, was part of a Spanish immersion program. His parents both speak Spanish. In fact, his father did not even know English when he entered the country and he did not go to school because of it. He said that it would be hard for him and his wife if Jason lost his Spanish. Jason’s Spanish teacher noticed that Jason has been using more and more English in the classroom and is afraid that he’s losing touch with his native language.

Kelly, a Chinese-American sixth grader, was learning Cantonese through a Cantonese immersion program. Neither of Kelly’s parents know Cantonese. Her father admitted to feeling embarrassed about being Chinese when he was a child. He wanted to be “American” like everyone else. Her mother felt separated from her grandmother because of the language barrier between them. For these reasons, they decided to put Kelly in the program.
The film sparked good energy in the audience, which led to great interaction during the panel that followed. The panelists were UTSA’s Dr. Maryellen Garcia, Dr. Wayne Wright, and Professor Mimi Yu. The panel was moderated by UTSA’s Dr. Peter Sayer. The audience asked a lot of questions and left many comments.

The panel opened with an explanation from Dr. Wayne Wright about existing bilingual programs. He discussed how the programs in the documentary were catalytic models of bilingual education; specifically they are called the dual language immersion model and are significant because two teachers, who each teach in a different language, are used. A more common model is called the transitional model. In this model a child will learn their native language first and then transition into English after that.

In response to a question, Mimi Yu stated that she thinks the dual language immersion programs are working. On a scale of one to ten, she rated Julian’s proficiency in Chinese as a seven. She then went on to say that his speaking ability will likely improve over time.

At one point during the documentary, a parent was concerned that his child was not learning enough English at school. He did not want her learning Spanish in school, because he could teach her that at home. The moderator, Dr. Sayer, wanted to know Dr. Garcia’s opinion on this. She started out by saying that “there are so many ramifications” to taking away someone’s native language for them to relearn later. Learning from home does not give the same kind of vocabulary that would be needed in the professional world. It’s just not formal enough. A woman in the audience commented that there is also a loss of grammar when learning from home.

One member of the audience wanted to know the reasoning behind the myth that children lose their native languages because of these programs. Dr. Wright stated that “it’s a concern among many.” All the panelists agreed that a child losing his/her native language is most likely due to a loss of pride or value for that language. If parents do not appreciate the importance of a language, then their children will not see the worth in it either. If a school does not give opportunities to use native languages, then children will be less motivated to use it. Sometimes they may feel

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-Dr. Wayne Wright
that there is no use for their language in a new country.

The issue of declaring English the national language of America was met with mixed feelings. Some members of the audience felt that it was a ridiculous idea. After all, America was built on multiple languages and cultures. Other members of the audience felt that there should be a national language. However, this would not mean that Americans would not appreciate or value in other languages. Dr. Wright felt that the people should have a common language, but declaring a national language is similar to “declaring that the sun is the official light source of the world.” It can be done, but what does it accomplish? It does not really change anything.

The general consensus among the audience and panelists was that bilingualism has its value. There are many opportunities to learn languages and these chances should not be passed up. However, it does take the community, educators and the legislature to work together to come up with the best model of this type of education. The documentary film, “Speaking in Tongues,” has sparked the interest of many and inspired them to truly consider the roles that multilingualism and multiculturalism can play in our society. To learn more about the film, the preview is available at: http://www.speakingintonguesfilm.info