

Ensuring Academic Success: The Real Issue in Educating English Language Learners

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For those of us who have followed for years the seemingly never-ending debate about whether language teachers should use bilingual or English Only methods when teaching English Language Learners (ELLs), the temptation is to succumb to cynicism. Too much valuable time has been wasted and these students are dropping out of our schools at two to three times the rate of white, English speaking Americans. Of late, my immediate reply to the question is “yes.” After a pause, I go on to add that “We should use whatever helpful strategies are at our disposal to ensure the academic and linguistic success of English language learners.” In many cases, for reasons I will expand upon within this article, those tools can and should include assistance in the native language. In other cases, formal assistance in the native language is impractical. In all cases, if we stop with this question we have stopped too soon, and we will have inadequately addressed the other issues that largely determine whether the support program we create will be truly effective.

The purpose of this article is to move beyond both the traditional language debate and the current political discussion. We need to consider what we must do to ensure the academic success of English language learners, not merely the acquisition of basic English skills. It will serve our purposes, however, to review both the current political context and the language debate, to better understand how we arrived where we currently are, and what we must now promote to make the educational future brighter for these students. James Crawford (1995) notes that when the U.S. Congress

passed the Bilingual Education Act in 1968 it was essentially “. . . a leap of faith, an experiment based more on good intentions than good pedagogy” (p. 12). Certainly schools had been using children’s native languages for instructional purposes since our nation’s beginning, but few programs existed in 1968 that could serve as research models or give legislators a clear idea of what worked and why. The political consensus was that something needed to be done for children who did not speak English.

Transitional bilingual education, designed to promote English acquisition and cultural assimilation, seemed better than the de facto policy of “sink-or-swim” which was prevalent at the time.

Today, thirty-three years after the Bilingual Education Act was signed into law, researchers have learned much more about how languages work, why English language learners need quality language assistance programs, and what programs are most effective in meeting their needs. Yet Crawford points out, paradoxically, that while the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 passed without a struggle, the concepts of teaching children bilingually, or assisting them with long-term, quality English as a Second Language (ESL) methodologies, are more politically controversial today than ever before (pp. 11-16).

Why is debate about educating English language learners more political than pedagogical? And why does it never seem to move beyond the language issue? Crawford’s answer, based on an analysis of the historical and political issues involved in bilingual education, is that bilingual education “. . . appear[s] to contradict treasured assumptions about the ‘melting pot,’ or more accurately, about the Anglo-conformist ethic in American culture” (pp. 13-14). Opponents of bilingual education adamantly

deny the charge of political interests, maintaining, as Linda Chavez does, that “my grandmother learned English perfectly without the help of bilingual education. Why do we assume that today’s new Americans can’t learn as quickly or as well?” (Amselle, 1995, p.16). But it is precisely this insistence, sometimes from both sides of the debate, to frame the issue in terms of which approach is best for “learning English,” that has misled educators and the public. “Learning English” simply is not enough when the rest of the school is learning math, science, social studies, the regular English language arts curriculum, and all the other subjects typically taught. Our insistence on seeing English skills as a pre-requisite for, rather than an outcome of, a meaningful school experience is costing English language learners valuable time they need to close the academic learning gap. Only after we examine what curriculum will be taught, how English language learners will learn it, and how long we will need to support their continuing academic progress should we begin to address the language of instruction issue. And, like it or not, local context will often determine when, where, and to what extent we use one language versus another.

Language Assistance Program Models Defined

The classic bilingual education debate has tended to revolve around two program models, Transitional bilingual education (TBE) and structured English immersion (SEI). Both typically have an English as a second language component where students learn to speak, read, and write English. The TBE program model, traditionally the federally sanctioned and supported approach, can be defined as a program that uses the child’s

native language to some degree in instruction in order to begin the reading process and clarify academic concepts, with the goal of transitioning English language learners to mainstream classrooms in English within three years. SEI programs, favored by political opponents of bilingual education, often allow students to respond to teachers in their native languages while teachers are instructed to teach always and only in English using what is referred to as sheltered English methodologies. These methodologies seek to make English comprehensible to students while teaching, to the extent possible, the regular classroom curriculum. SEI, like TBE, typically aims for early-exit of students from the program—in three years or less. Researchers increasingly are in agreement that three years, be it in TBE or SEI programs, is not enough time. Programs that drop support too soon, just at the point where basic conversational English skills are learned, leave English language learners with insufficient academic and literacy supports to ensure success as students move toward the more difficult content covered in each succeeding grade (Crawford, 1995; Brisk, 1998).

Late-exit models have emerged as the favorites of the research community, mainly because of their philosophy of sustained support for academic progress, usually up to four to six years, or as long as it takes to be confident that the student knows what he or she needs to know to thrive academically. There are two bilingual examples of this model: developmental or late-exit bilingual education (DBE) and two-way bilingual education. Both examples attempt to fully utilize and “develop” the child’s native language plus English, with the only difference being that two-way bilingual programs admit English speaking children in roughly equal numbers with English language learners and offer both majority and minority language students the prospect of

becoming bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural (Brisk, 1998). Interestingly, while traditional bilingual programs are a difficult “sell” to the general public, two-way bilingual programs, advertised as special accelerated “enrichment” or magnet programs (often called International Schools), usually have waiting lists of families wishing to enroll their children. Two-way bilingual education is thus unique in its potential to create environments that integrate language majority and language minority populations. Late-exit, developmental (or maintenance) bilingual programs, differ from two-way bilingual programs in that they are created principally for language minority children and are usually found only in elementary settings (Nieto, 2000).

In schools where many languages are present and none predominate, most researchers would support a late-exit version of structured English immersion, where program students would receive ESL language instruction concurrently with what California educators have lately been calling Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE). Californians dropped the previous term, Sheltered English (Content) Instruction, seeking to emphasize that these methodologies begin lesson planning with grade appropriate academic standards, and then add the necessary linguistic “scaffolding” to ensure academic success. It is worth noting that in some of the most effective late-exit SEI programs, teachers and/or bilingual paraprofessionals, find creative ways to incorporate students’ languages and cultures into instruction, even when a formal bilingual program is not possible. Language choice need not be an all-or-nothing prospect (Lucas, 1994). If this array of program options and terms seems confusing, keep in mind that the major variables mentioned thus far are the amount of native language use, orientation toward accelerating academics, and length of time

within the program. The question related to these principal program variables must then be, *to what extent will changing the variables influence the achievement of academic parity with English speaking peers?*

A Few Basics in Language Acquisition

To answer that question, it may be worthwhile to briefly review a few basics of language acquisition with respect to English language learners. Krashen (1996) postulates that in order for children to understand and thus benefit from classroom instruction, they must receive language input that is “comprehensible” to them. By definition, language that is incomprehensible cannot result in learning regardless of what is being taught. Children who enter schools not speaking English find, at least initially, that most everything they hear in English is incomprehensible. If English were the only subject learned in school, these students would simply have to learn to speak, read, and write their new language (a process difficult enough as those who have seriously studied foreign languages know!). While mastering English, however, they must also acquire literacy skills commensurate with their age and grade, and reach academic parity in the content areas taught in school (Krashen, 1996).

Cummins (1986) has postulated the language acquisition process as having both social and academic language dimensions. Social language skills, highly contextualized and involving a fairly basic vocabulary, are relatively easy for students to acquire within one to two years. This is the language typical of face-to-face, one-on-one conversations with peers. It is the more abstract and academically challenging language, however, that children must master, says Cummins, if they are to keep pace with the mainstream

curriculum. Gee (1999) further suggests that each subject area presents its own unique “discourse issues” that involve distinct language, conceptual knowledge, and ways of behaving or relating to others. By its nature, each academic discourse requires that students possess a certain degree of conceptual background knowledge, attained in either their first or second language, to ultimately make comprehensible the curriculum presented to them. Research suggests that these skills, even with adequate support, take at least five to seven years to fully develop for most English language learners. The concept of academic discourse is useful in that it explains fairly well what most major research studies show: English language learners have relatively little trouble acquiring basic English skills in almost any program design, but have not, for the most part, achieved academic parity with successful English speaking peers (August & Hakuta, 1997).

These insights into language acquisition form the basis of researchers’ belief that support programs must provide: (a) input that is comprehensible in English or the native language, or both, (b) early access to the same academic standards as English speaking peers, and (c) long-term academic support. Policymakers and the public remain largely unconvinced of both the role of the native language and the need for long-term support. They see the purpose of bilingual or ESL programs solely in terms of compensatory English skills instruction, not as an issue of access and mastery of the academic curriculum. So prevalent is this view of bilingual and ESL classrooms, many bilingual and English as a second language teachers have yet to appreciate fully their key role in making the common curriculum comprehensible. Rather they often see themselves primarily as teachers of compensatory English skills. Thus we see a

preponderance of early-exit programs with the primary focus on remediating students' English deficit. This "quick fix" approach, whether all in English or partially in the native language, is largely disconnected from the curriculum of the mainstream classroom.

Research Evidence as Support for Quality Curriculum

As was mentioned earlier, most traditional programs in the United States for English language learners can fit loosely into the TBE or SEI program definitions. It is not surprising, therefore, that most research studies of the last 35 years have looked at one or compared both of these models, usually with the goal of proving definitively that one is superior to the other. These two models share more traits, however, than researchers fixated on the language question have considered. Both are usually early-exit, mostly remedial in focus, and often taught through pull-out approaches where English language learners go with a bilingual or ESL teacher for a certain number of hours per week "to learn English." The primary goal of both programs is to "exit" English language learners to what is considered the "real classroom" and the "real curriculum." Early-exit remedial programs, arguably, become linguistic and cultural "ghettos" where children are isolated from content rich environments in the name of teaching them English (Crawford, 1995, pp. 102-138). Guadarrama (1995) writes about the dangers of defining programs based solely on the goal of learning English quickly while academic curricula are forgotten: "The issue is not so much whether students will learn English, because we know they will, but rather whether they will achieve academic success and engage as contributing members of our society in meaningful, productive

ways (p.45).”

Both traditional TBE and SEI programs create differentiated, compensatory bilingual or ESL curricula, largely failing to align themselves with what regular classroom teachers teach in math, science, social studies, language arts, and other subjects. Given these considerations, it may come as no great surprise that, while a few studies have found advantages for one over the other, the majority of research studies have concluded that there is “no significant difference” between TBE and SEI programs.¹ The largest of these was a federally sponsored longitudinal study commonly called The Ramirez Report.²

¹ Among the hundreds of studies and program evaluations, there are two meta-analyses of multiple studies bilingual proponents frequently cite to support their claim that TBE is superior to SEI. The first was conducted by Ann Willig (1985), the second by Jay Greene (1997). Information about both can be located at the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (NCBE) at www.ncbe.gwu.edu. For opposing arguments, visit the Center for Equal Opportunity website at www.ceousa.org.

² Officially titled The Longitudinal Study of Structured English Immersion Strategy, Early-Exit and Late-Exit Transitional Bilingual Education Programs for Language-Minority Children.

The Ramirez Report, to date one of the most extensive studies of the effects of differing programs on language minority student achievement, was an eight-year project (1983-84 through 1990-91) in which data were collected in five states and 554 classrooms. The study compared achievement rates of children receiving no significant native language support (structured English immersion), limited native language support (transitional bilingual education), and more extensive native language support (late-exit, developmental bilingual education³). The Ramirez Report concluded that there was no significant difference between TBE and SEI programs when looking at achievement in mathematics, English language, and English reading. However, late-exit, DBE programs produced somewhat more growth in these areas than the other two program models (p. 39).

Gary Cziko (1992) points to the interesting fact that the Ramirez Report provides evidence for and against bilingual education, “or rather, *against* what bilingual education normally *is* (early-exit) and *for* what it *could be*” (late-exit) (p.12, parenthetical program descriptors added). In the same article he maintains that it is difficult to summarize what he calls the “staggering amount of evaluative research on bilingual education.” As an example, he writes of discovering 921 bibliographic entries (ERIC) using the descriptors “bilingual education and program evaluation” or “bilingual education and program effectiveness” (1966 through 1990) (p.10). In spite of the immense volume of research, Cziko is justifiably reluctant to conclude that bilingual education is unconditionally

³ The Ramirez Report refers to these programs as “late-exit transitional” rather than using the term developmental or maintenance. They are the same program types.

superior to English immersion. He recognizes, however, the promise of both late-exit and more recent two-way, late-exit bilingual models, citing data from the San Diego bilingual immersion program that clearly show gains for language majority and minority student participants at or above grade norms in math and reading in English and the native language.

Cziko does not speculate as to why late-exit bilingual programs may be better. Bilingual advocates would say they are better because they use more of the native language than any other program model. Bilingual opponents counter that if this were the case, TBE programs should also be more effective than SEI programs, which is still debatable depending on whose research study one favors. Again, the notion that there may be something fundamentally different in the curriculum as typically practiced in late-exit programs has not been widely acknowledged, and until very recently, has hardly had any impact on the design or goals of most research in this area.

In the U.S., the same programs that are compensatory in their curricular focus are often also highly teacher-directed. This orientation, as opposed to student-centered approaches, tends to be more tightly controlled by teachers and allows less time for students to engage in small group learning activities. It is not surprising that these bilingual programs have had a difficult time distinguishing themselves from equally ineffective, traditional English as a second language programs, or no program at all (Cziko, 1992, pp. 10-15). Two-way and late-exit bilingual programs, however, have been among the first bilingual program types to increase their emphasis on cooperative learning, experiential discovery-based approaches, integrated language arts, and interdisciplinary thematic teaching. All these methodologies emphasize acquiring language through the common core academic content and are highly interactive in their

instructional design. Howard Gardner (1993) uses two metaphors to describe an enriched, authentic, and interactive classroom environment he believes all students need to promote “learning for understanding.” He maintains that classrooms should resemble a combination of an apprentice’s workshop and a children’s museum. These metaphors also describe very well the contextually rich, hands-on environment language educators believe is needed to maximize student comprehension and learning (August & Hakuta, 1997).

A good example of a practical classroom model of instruction that stresses access to the core curriculum and student interaction within the classroom is the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA). J. Michael O’Malley and Anna Chamot (1986) developed this instructional model specifically for bilingual and ESL classrooms. It combines an experiential, student-centered orientation with academic content instruction and metacognitive awareness of the learning process to assist students in becoming more efficient, self-reflective learners. As methodologies like CALLA become more prevalent, both bilingual and ESL programs are demonstrating greater effectiveness and higher academic success rates for English language learners. Even with improved methods, however, four to six years is a more accurate assessment of how long quality support will be required for most English language learners, not the two to three typically advocated.

Moving Beyond the Language of Instruction Debate

In 1997, The National Research Council published *Improving Schooling for*

Language-Minority Children: A Research Agenda. This work summarizes more than thirty years of research into the education of English language learners and offers principles for new research priorities. The authors suggest the need for a more complex research agenda that looks at, among other topics, how English language learners acquire content area knowledge and skills. They state that “in the area of content learning, there exists very little fundamental research with English-language learners” (p.6). In part, this is due to the heavy focus on the language of instruction issue.

As with most prior studies, Thomas and Collier’s (1997) twelve-year longitudinal study began by attempting to resolve once and for all which language program model, or how much native language use, is optimal. They went beyond this question, however, and have attempted to define each program model not merely in terms of language, but also with regard to other program characteristics that appear to facilitate the acquisition of high quality curricula in core academic subjects. Their findings suggest that (a) long-term support is better than early-exit, (b) content-based support is superior to traditional language teaching and, (c) programs that develop native language skills are significantly better than English Only approaches. Krashen and Biber (1988) would agree with this, maintaining that successful language assistance programs share three principal characteristics: “(a) High quality subject matter teaching in the first language, without translation; (b) development of first language literacy; and (c) comprehensible input in English” (p. 25).

How much of this success is due to language use per se, and how much of it is because the late-exit design encourages grade-level, content-based curricula, and accelerated, as opposed to remedial, methods of instruction? It is, at least in large part,

an issue of access to high quality curriculum. Which program can provide meaningful access sooner, and sustain the access longer? If academic success in the mainstream classroom is the ultimate goal of any program for English language learners, programs that begin teaching the common academic curriculum in the language students more fully understand enjoy an initial advantage. Without native language support as one of the tools, English language learners must first reach at least an intermediate fluency in English. This is the point where quality sheltered English content area instruction can provide the same curricular access. The advantage good bilingual programs enjoy, however, does not preclude SEI programs from also reaching high levels of academic achievement. To do so, these programs must look for ways to address the issue of grade-level academic content learning, as soon as reasonably feasible, and sustain quality, accelerated academic support for the long-term.

This could be seen as the good news in the continuing saga. This is not to say that bilingual education, properly delivered with high quality curricular goals, should not be offered as the best possible option. After all, wouldn't most people consider literacy in two languages better than literacy in one? Rather, when the formal bilingual program option is impractical (as it frequently is), we can achieve solid results with English language learners if we think long-term, content-based support and accelerated access to mainstream content and performance standards.

The other necessary shift for meeting the needs of English language learners is away from isolated programs within schools toward integrated, inclusive programs throughout schools. Carter and Chatfield (1986) emphasize that: “. . . the complex interplay between program and school must be analyzed and powerful efforts toward

radical school improvement must be undertaken” (p. 203). Griego-Jones (1995) is even more direct in her assessment of the problem: “If a program cannot adequately be integrated into the system, it has very little chance of succeeding in accomplishing its instructional mission” (p. 2). Again, one could argue that access to a quality curriculum common to all learners is at the heart of these concerns for effective program integration within the larger school context.

Conclusion

Cziko writes, “For communities that have the good fortune to contain a sizable population of language-minority children, it would seem an almost inexcusable waste of community resources not to maintain and develop the language of the linguistic minority and not to consider sharing it with the majority” (p.15). This, in the end, would seem to be bilingual education’s best hope for more widespread implementation, where that implementation is feasible. The growing realization is that even though structured English immersion approaches can succeed, bilingual programs offer a bonus: bilingual and biliterate citizens.

Recent census figures conservatively estimate the number of English language learners at 4.5 million nationwide. Yet across the nation, in spite of Cziko’s belief that quality language assistance programs are in communities’ best interest, less funding is allocated per capita each year to both bilingual and SEI support programs. Dividing the U.S. Department of Education’s annual budget allocation for assistance to local bilingual/ESL programs by the number of English language learners would come to less

than \$50 per child, per year. In itself this says very little as the overall federal investment in education is only six percent. At the state level, where education funding is crucial, expenditures typically vary from non-existent to under \$500 a child. This simply is not enough. To fill the void, local funding provides the balance—frequently \$2,000 - \$4,000 more for a quality program—increasingly in an era when funding one program means shortchanging another (Crawford, 1995). In this context, it is easy to see why many programs focus predominantly on raising basic English language skills, rather than long-term academic support.

At a time when other special program budgets have fought to maintain level funding, support for programs serving English language learners is on the decline, perhaps in part because policy makers have grown tired of the never-ending language debate and the general perception that these students will learn English anyway. The traditional insistence of both sides in framing the debate simply around quick mastery of English versus maintenance of the native language has led most researchers and policy makers to repeatedly ask the wrong questions, wondering why the answers to those questions never seem to get any clearer. If we begin by defining the purpose of schooling in terms of academic success, and we see such success for English language learners as an issue both of long-term support and access to mainstream curriculum, we are offered the prospect of creating programs that truly work for these students.

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