

# Educating English language learners in U.S. schools: Agenda for a new millennium

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**Introduction.** The special “bilingual” programs that are being provided in U.S. schools for immigrant, migrant, and refugee children remain far from meeting the equal education goal for these students and actually run counter to the original intent of the Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968. Radical changes in education policy and dramatic improvements in teaching strategies are urgently needed. I offer concrete suggestions for legislative changes at the state and federal level, and on necessary improvements in teaching strategies and curriculum. My recommendations are based on research conducted by colleagues during the past thirty years and on my experience of twenty-five years in the field as a classroom teacher, program administrator, and consultant to U.S. school districts.

**Scope of the Problem.** Passage of Proposition 227 by the voters of California in June 1998, the “English for the Children” initiative, has focused national attention on the plight of limited-English proficient (LEP) children who have been given years of native language instruction with the purpose of improving their learning of English and their mastery of academic content. The increasingly apparent problem is that the more special instruction in the primary language and the longer the delay in using English for classroom work, the less English language is learned, with no measurable gains in academic achievement in the school subjects reported for these students. It is not a lack of special help, but that the help is mostly of the wrong kind. Proposition 227 was ill-received by the education establishment and wrongly characterized as an anti-immigrant measure. Although I do not support every detail of the new law, I do believe a drastic action of this sort was the only remedy to remove the dead hand of bureaucratic mandates on California school districts, state edicts that rarely allowed deviation from the established native-language instruction model.

Close to four million children in mainland U.S. schools do not have a sufficient command of the English language to do ordinary classroom work in English. Since the late 1960s, this group of students has constituted the fastest

growing part of our school population, due to the highest levels of legal immigration in U.S. history, a high rate of illegal entrants, and the admission of refugees fleeing war and persecution in their native lands (U.S. General Accounting Office 1994). In the letter and the spirit of federal and state laws, bilingual education is the special effort to remove the language barrier to an equal educational opportunity. Originally intended to help poor Mexican-American children learn English, the 1968 Bilingual Education Act's goal was "not to keep any specific language alive . . . but just to try to make those children fully literate in English," in the words of Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas, author of the bill (1967).

Throughout the era of bilingual teaching efforts, two-thirds or more of the limited-English students have been children of Spanish-speaking families. In fact, it is fair to say that bilingual programs have been developed almost entirely for this language group, although legally, bilingual programs may be provided for the speakers of all 327 languages represented in the U.S. population (U.S. Department of Commerce 1990). Latino children are the most likely to be enrolled in native-language programs, and, therefore, are the greatest recipients of bilingual schooling. Unfortunately, Latino students have the highest school dropout rates in the country, with little or no signs of improvement. The final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project, published in February 1998, states that "[w]hile the dropout rate for other school-aged populations has declined, more or less steadily, over the last 25 years, the overall Hispanic dropout rate started higher and has remained between 30 and 35 percent during that same time period . . . 2.5 times the rate for blacks and 3.5 times the rate for White non-Hispanics" (U.S. Department of Education 1998: 5). It would not be accurate to say that bilingual education is the cause of the high dropout problem, but it may reasonably be said that since it does not appear to be improving the educational success of Latino students, it may be one of the contributing factors.

**Theories of bilingual education.** Ten years after the passage of the 1968 Bilingual Education Act, theorists developed the rationale for the U.S. policy on language minority education (Rossell 1998: 5). This rationale truly requires a willing suspension of disbelief, that is, we are asked to disregard most of what we have learned about language teaching and language acquisition. The main theories and hypotheses supporting bilingual instruction are the following:

1. A second language is not learned best in the early years of a child's schooling but will be acquired more effectively over a period of several years, after oral language development and literacy skills are first mastered in the child's primary language.
2. The time-on-task principle—more time spent studying a subject results in better learning of that subject—does not apply to the learning of English as a second language.

3. Five to seven years of participation in native language instruction (with gradual introduction of English) will result in the optimal achievement for language minority students: Better learning of English, the ability to do grade-level work in English, and higher levels of academic performance later on in high school.
4. Literacy skills must be developed in the primary language first, before attempting to teach reading and writing in the second language.
5. Extended native language instruction produces higher self-esteem and reduces stress of learning in a second language, which leads to better school performance and may also result in lowering dropout rates.

Not one of these theories/hypotheses has been definitively confirmed by objective, reliable research. Nor has any reliable evidence yet been published that shows native language instruction programs consistently producing better results in students' academic achievement and in second language proficiency (see appendix).

Although the theories described above gained currency over the past two decades, they are now increasingly coming under careful scrutiny. Some counter-arguments follow:

1. While it is widely accepted among educators and linguists that older students and adults are capable of studying a new language intensively and efficiently, there is also general agreement that young children learn a new language easily and naturally when placed in a rich, second-language environment and are given maximum opportunities for natural interaction with native speakers, such as a school setting. Nothing in my twenty-five years in this field has yet convinced me that delaying the focus on second language in favor of primary language instruction for children starting school in the United States in the early grades is a wise policy. Most persuasive in this regard has been my involvement with public school programs from preschool classrooms through senior high schools.
2. That the time-on-task principle does not apply to second language learners is one of those ideas that is so contrary to good, common sense that it does not merit discussion. The obvious conclusion that limited-English students who are given more opportunities for interaction with native speakers and more direct instruction in the English language and more instruction in the school subjects in English are able to learn English more quickly and effectively and are able to do school work in English is borne out by at least these two studies: the El Paso Bilingual Immersion Project (1992) and the New York City Public Schools study published in 1994.

3. The five-to-seven-year hypothesis propounded mainly by Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas has no basis in fact (Rossell 1998). Russell Gersten at the University of Oregon recently stated, emphatically, that “the cornerstone of most contemporary models of bilingual education is that content knowledge and skills learned in a student’s primary language will transfer to English once the student has experienced between five and seven years of native language instruction. Yet absolutely no empirical research supports this proposition. Methodological problems so severe that the question cannot be adequately answered plague the research on the subject” (Gersten 1999: 43).
4. Literacy skills need not be developed first in the primary language, if one of the major goals of language minority schooling is the development of English language literacy for full inclusion in mainstream classrooms and for equal educational opportunity. The prestigious National Academy of Sciences report reviewing thirty years of bilingual education research (August and Hakuta 1997: 177) reveals the lack of empirical support for native language instruction in the early grades in this cautious statement: “We do not know whether there will be long-term advantages or disadvantages to initial literacy instruction in the primary language versus English, given a very high-quality program of known effectiveness in both cases.” The authors also note that “it is clear that many children first learn to read in a second language without serious negative consequences. These include children who successfully go through early-immersion, two-way, and English as a second language (ESL) based programs in North America” (August and Hakuta 1997: 23).
5. The self-esteem level of students in native language instruction classrooms versus LEP students enrolled in English immersion programs is approximately the same, as reported in comparative studies in Dade County, Florida (Rothfarb, Ariza, and Urrutia 1987), Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (Simons-Turner, Connelly, Goldberg 1995), and El Paso, Texas (Gerston and Woodward 1992), to cite a few.

**Effects of K-12 schooling on Hispanic adults.** A new study of the labor market effects of bilingual education among Hispanic workers analyzes the earnings, ten years after high school, for adults principally enrolled in English-language programs compared with those who received native language instruction. Although the authors, Lopez and Mora (1998: 33) readily acknowledge the preliminary nature of this study, they do report that “utilizing data from *High School and Beyond*, we find that first generation and (to a lesser extent) second generation Hispanics who attended a bilingual education program appear to earn significantly less (30%) than otherwise similar English-immersed peers who received monolingual English instruction, *ceteris paribus*.” Lopez and Mora also

report that in regard to job sorting, adults who were in bilingual education programs are in less skilled jobs than English-language educated peers from the same background. Certainly much more research must be done on the economic and social effects of different school programs on LEP students later in life, assuming that reliable data become available.

**Most Promising Educational Approaches.** My professional experience in this field strongly suggests the following language teaching strategies and curricular designs hold the greatest promise for “leveling the playing field” for limited-English students:

1. Early immersion in a carefully structured, content-based English language program produces the best and quickest second language acquisition for school purposes. This is not a novel idea but an approach that has been widely known for years but not so widely applied because of the political and legal imposition of the native language teaching ideology. Now that thirty years of research has not confirmed the superiority of native language instruction programs, it is time to allow diversity of educational options.
2. Teaching all the language skills concurrently in the second language—listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing—from the first day of school will provide English language learners with the strongest base for literacy in the second language, for learning of school subjects taught in English, and for *thinking* in that language. The most promising curricular design would include these features: a literature-rich reading program, language lessons focused on school subjects, as much linkage as possible between lessons for limited-English students, and the grade-appropriate curriculum for each subject—an integration of linguistic and cognitive development in the mainstream setting rather than a separate, segregated education.
3. The highest level of interaction between limited-English students and their English-speaking peers—in both classroom and informal situations—provides essential opportunities for second language development and for practice with formal and informal speech patterns. The Transitional Bilingual Education model segregates by language and ethnicity for 50 to 80% of the school day for several years, unnecessarily delaying both second language learning opportunities and integration of diverse student groups.

More professional development for experienced teachers, administrators, and auxiliary staff, as well as better preparation of new teacher candidates, is necessary to make all school personnel knowledgeable about language minority chil-

dren. Given the rapid increase in the enrollment of limited-English students in U.S. public schools in the past two decades, all school personnel need an understanding of the special needs of these students, of the different cultural backgrounds and how they affect children's school readiness and adaptation to American ways, of reasonable expectations for linguistic and cognitive progress according to each child's age, previous educational experience, family background. Too often well-meaning teachers set unrealistic standards for limited-English students, either impossibly high or ineffectually low, simply from a lack of accurate information.

To avoid misunderstandings, I will clarify my position on a few issues often raised by bilingual education advocates. Learning English is not the only priority for bilingual children. Of course, they must learn subject matter content as well. But, in my view, learning English early and well is the absolute prerequisite to academic achievement in that language and in the mainstream school, community, and larger social settings. Developing literacy in the primary language of the family is a desirable but secondary priority that should be offered as a voluntary activity where a speech community actively requests such a program.

It must also be acknowledged that no single school program, whether bilingual or ESL or two-way, is guaranteed to ensure student success for all children. A large percentage of the children who begin school without a sufficient knowledge of the common language—immigrant, refugee, or native-born nonspeakers of English—are children from families of poverty. Often their parents do not know English, do not have a high level of education, and are forced to move the family frequently to seek better living conditions (U.S. General Accounting Office 1994). All of these factors have an effect on a child's ability to achieve his or her highest potential in academic achievement, no matter what kind of special program is being provided. It is well to bear these facts in mind when determining which interventions will best serve the needs of children for self-realization, for upward mobility, and for eventual inclusion in a broad civic and social community.

**Recommendations for changes at federal and state levels.** Assuming there is general agreement that the improved schooling of limited-English students will result in higher academic achievement and lower dropout rates for Latino students, as well as greater numbers of formerly limited-English students going on to higher education and skilled jobs, I would suggest a number of changes at the federal and state levels that are most likely to effect these improvements.

*Federal.* On April 27, 1998, Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley announced a major shift in education policy for limited-English students. He recommended a goal of English language proficiency in three years for virtually all English language learners. He said at the time that "new immigrants have a passion to learn English, and they want the best for their children" (Riley 1998: 2).

Director of the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA) Delia Pompa stated at the opening session of GURT '99 that federal policy does not mandate native language instruction programs but supports flexibility in program choice at the local district level. I, personally, concur with both policy statements, but I have, for too long, seen a discord between policy and implementation.

If flexibility in program choice is indeed the policy of OBEMLA then it must be communicated to the Office of Civil Rights, whose compliance reviews have been inflexibly aimed at supporting bilingual education programs and pressuring districts to engage in more native language instruction than the district deems suitable for its students (Littlejohn 1998). This was not intended under the 1974 *Lau v. Nichols* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court (cited in Chavez 1991: 14–15). *Lau* made no requirement that language-minority children be taught in their native language, but instead mandated that they receive special help to remove the language barriers to an equal education. It appears that the Office of Civil Rights needs to be told to stop exceeding its legal responsibilities.

Another major area in federal policy that needs a drastic overhaul is OBEMLA itself. To implement Director Pompa's announced flexibility policy it is now time to remove the restrictions on funding at OBEMLA. Currently 75% of all grants are restricted to native language instruction programs and 25% are allocated to special English-language focus programs. And this is an improvement over the policy in effect up to 1988, where 96% of grants were given to native language teaching programs and only 4% to "alternative" programs, meaning English language focus.

There is no justification for the current funding policy to continue, since it is the Department of Education's funded research that has found no superiority for native language instruction programs (see appendix). I recommend that the major part of OBEMLA funds be awarded directly to states with limited-English students, in the form of block grants, to be disbursed on a per capita basis according to each district's enrollment numbers. That would be the equitable way of providing extra funding to school districts specifically to be used for these children, with state monitoring, and without dictating a pedagogical approach. Emergency Immigrant Education Act funds are administered in this fashion. Such a plan would eliminate OBEMLA's present grant procedure, which is cumbersome, time-consuming, and rewards only a few districts each year.

*State.* To bring this educational enterprise up to date with what we have learned since 1968, the most essential changes must occur at the state level. Legislation drafted in a dozen states, beginning with Massachusetts in 1971, either mandates bilingual education programs exclusively or coerces school districts to provide bilingual programs through funding regulations or strong-arm pressure by state education departments. Of the ten states enrolling three-fourths of the

limited-English students in the country, four mandate bilingual education: Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Texas. Three states—Michigan, New Mexico, and New York—do not have a mandate but only provide funding for bilingual programs. Arizona and Florida fund all programs for limited-English students. California, the state with 43% of all LEP students in the United States, currently has a legal mandate to teach these children in an English immersion program (Center for Equal Opportunity 1997).

The time has come to acknowledge the very limited success of the bilingual teaching experiment and for state initiatives to move forward seriously on two fronts: flexibility and accountability. State laws must remove the imposition of the bilingual model on all communities—the “one-size-fits-all” approach—and allow all districts with limited-English students the right to exercise local choice, giving the many skillful people teaching these children the freedom to use their best talents to make the necessary changes and improvements. States must provide extra resources to ensure support for professional development, curricular innovations, and extra learning opportunities after school and in summer, and leave the actual planning of program details to the districts. Coupled with local program choice is the obligation on schools to do careful, consistent monitoring and reporting on student achievement. It is a national disgrace that the evaluation of bilingual children has been so widely evaded over the years, even by Massachusetts, the state that started bilingual education (Massachusetts Bilingual Education Commission 1994), and California, the state with the largest concentration of limited-English students (Berman et al. 1992).

**Conclusion.** In an *Education Week* article dated April 29, 1998, Michael Kirst of Stanford University pinpointed the problem with bilingual education that must be overcome through rigorous accountability for student progress. He said, “From its inception . . . in the 1970s, bilingual education has been oriented toward inputs, process, and compliance. . . . The assumption was if you have this input, the outputs would take care of themselves. So . . . [we monitored] whether you mounted the program, and not its results” (quoted in Schnaiburg 1998: 16).

Fortunately for the future improvement of language minority education, the accountability movement is now beginning to include limited-English students. During the past five years, Texas has invested in developing statewide curricular frameworks and the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). In 1993, Massachusetts passed an Education Reform Act that has poured hundreds of millions of dollars of new money into state curriculum improvements and the testing of all fourth, eighth, and tenth graders through the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). California developed a Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program to measure academic progress of all students, in grades two through eleven every year, beginning in 1998. All of these well-funded, large-scale projects will gather useful data on student

progress and, potentially, provide the impetus for curricular and pedagogical improvements.

The needs of language-minority students are serious and pressing, especially for Latino children who make up two-thirds of the limited-English students in our schools and for whom native language instruction is almost exclusively provided. In a recent *New York Times* feature (January 31, 1999), James Traub argues that Latino students spend far too much time in native language instruction, and that “bilingual education seems to be hurting Latino students the most—the one group it was initially designed to help” (33).

For earlier immigrant groups living in concentrated communities speaking Italian, Greek, or Yiddish, the transition from native language to English and from unskilled labor to professional careers was expected to take three generations. We cannot wait three generations today; we must do it in one. The schools must help students to master the English language, learn their school subjects, and become competent in the technology skills required even for entry-level jobs, at a minimum. Schools must also prepare the most motivated and hard working students for higher education and professions. The highest goal, in my view, is to give all children who start school as limited-English students the equal educational opportunities to become capable, successful citizens involved in the civic, cultural, and economic life of this most multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multicultural country. Anything less is not good enough. Finally, our efforts must be concentrated not on saving the bilingual education system—the status quo—but on giving our children the best educational opportunities.

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APPENDIX. A SUMMARY OF MAJOR BILINGUAL EDUCATION STUDIES

Prepared by Rosalie P. Porter, Ed.D., for New York University Law School Symposium February 28, 1997

1978—American Institute for Research report concludes that limited-English proficient (LEP) students in bilingual programs have less success in learning English than students receiving no special help at all; LEP students learn math equally well if they are taught in Spanish and English or only in English (Danoff et al. 1978).

1981—Baker and DeKanter report (U.S. Department of Education): The case for the effectiveness of Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) is so weak that exclusive reliance on this instructional method is clearly not justified (Baker and DeKanter 1981).

1988—Dade County, Florida, 3-Year Curriculum Content Project: Limited-English students learned as much subject matter if they were taught in English or if they were taught in Spanish—no advantage for native language instruction (Rothfarb, Ariza, and Urrutia 1987).

1992—El Paso Bilingual Immersion Project: LEP children in English immersion classes consistently out-performed children in TBE classes in learning English and in learning school subjects over the ten-year study (Gersten and Woodward 1992).

1992—California State Study: Results based on twenty years of bilingual education reveal generally a poor quality of bilingual programs, no evidence that native language instruction is beneficial, lack of accountability, lack of data collection regarding academic progress of LEP students, and keeping LEP students in bilingual programs for too many years (Berman et al. 1992).

1994—Massachusetts State Study: Results based on twenty-three years of bilingual education show lack of accountability, no evidence that TBE programs produce good or poor results, no data evaluating performance of limited-English students compared with other groups of students (Massachusetts Bilingual Education Commission 1994).

1994—New York City Study: LEP students in English as a Second Language classes exited their special program faster and did better in mainstream classrooms than students taught in their native language in TBE classes (Board of Education of the City of New York 1994).

1996—Rossell and Baker analysis of research: “After reviewing the results of these studies [ $n = 72$ ], we find no consistent research support for transitional bilingual education as a superior instructional practice for improving the English language achievement of LEP children” (Rossell and Baker 1996: 49).

1997—National Research Council conclusion on examining twenty-nine years of research: “We do not know whether there will be long-term advantages or disadvantages to initial literacy instruction in the primary language versus English” (August and Hakuta 1997).