

## Language and policy issues in the education of immigrant students

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**Introduction.** The impact of immigration on U.S. institutions and society has been widely noted and commented upon. The foreign-born constitute the fastest-growing segment of the population, reaching 25.8 million in 1997, just under 10% of the population, and the highest proportion since World War II (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998). Even more striking than numbers, however, is the make-up of recent waves of immigration. Since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated national origin quotas, Asia and Latin America have replaced Europe as the main sources of newcomers to the United States. The largest groups come from Mexico (over one-fourth of the foreign-born population), China, Cuba, India, and Vietnam. New immigrants to the United States come with diverse languages, cultures, and experiences.

These trends are by no means unique to the United States. International migration patterns show that while some countries, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, have relatively larger proportions of immigrant populations, many other countries also have sizable numbers of immigrants. In fact, “migration is now global and no longer unidirectional. Today, few countries are not affected by either immigration or emigration” (Edmonston and Passel 1994: 23). This worldwide movement of populations across national borders is predicted to continue and will be the norm of the future. Projections for the United States tell us that immigration will remain an important influence on the composition of our society and will be the primary vehicle for population growth in the future, barring dramatic events in the world or changes in U.S. policy that alter the current course (Edmonston and Passel 1994).

In an increasing number of schools across the United States, the foreign-born also constitute a fast increasing segment of the student population. Recent studies indicate, however, that few schools are adequately and appropriately serving these linguistic and cultural minorities. In this paper, I discuss language, education, and policy issues concerning immigrant students and the opportunities (and challenges) presented to us by their presence in our schools. We need to develop strategies to achieve a “win-win” result for our society and for the school-aged immigrants who join us.

Can we move toward an orientation where we seek to build on the language and other skills that immigrants bring? It seems obvious to me that it is in everyone's best interest to help immigrant students prepare for success and productivity by giving them (and all students) an education that is responsive to their needs. It also seems like common sense that we would be better off if we could maintain and develop the language skills and other strengths that these students bring to school with them. To succeed, they must add English to their repertoire (a matter of wide agreement), but can we conserve and build on the languages they know when they enter our schools at the same time (as both their individual and our societal assets)? Our current language and education policies treat languages other than English as problems. Can we reorient these policies to see languages as resources?

In exploring these possibilities, I describe an initiative that the Center for Applied Linguistics has participated in since 1993, the Program in Immigrant Education. In addition to our findings about promising approaches for adolescent English language learners, these efforts are leading us to see that many of the reforms that make schools responsive to immigrants and diverse student populations in general are making schools better for all students, native-born and immigrant, linguistic minority and linguistic majority alike.

**Immigrant students in secondary schools.** While immigration has affected all aspects of American life, the changing demography of the United States is very keenly felt in education. In 1997, 2.3 million children between the ages of five and eighteen were identified as foreign-born by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1998). By 2010, following current trends, 22% of the school-aged population (9 million in number) will be first- or second-generation immigrant children (Fix and Passel 1994). With over 90% of recent immigrants coming from non-English-speaking countries, schools are increasingly receiving students who do not speak English at home and who have little or no proficiency in English.

There is accumulating evidence that most school systems have not been able to give immigrant students access to experiences and learning that facilitate their success (considering dropout rates and other educational statistics that are frequently cited). Serving immigrant English language learners at the secondary school level is especially challenging. Faltis (1999: 1) notes that "bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) education at the secondary level is one of the most unexamined and overlooked areas of education in the United States." August and Hakuta (1997) in a review of research on educating language minority students also identified middle and high schools, along with programs for newcomers, as needing attention.

In order to provide schooling that is responsive to adolescent immigrant students, many language, academic, and social factors must be taken into account. U.S.-born secondary students entered school at age five or six and, if they re-

mained in school, followed a relatively predictable sequence of coursework. As a result, educators can assume certain background experience and knowledge, and educational policies (such as graduation requirements) are developed for that context. But such assumptions cannot be made about immigrant students, who arrive with widely varying experiences and skills that may not directly translate into readiness for U.S. schools. They arrive at all ages. They may have had high-quality education, possibly even better than that available in the United States, or no previous educational experience at all. Differentiated responses are called for when the population includes both a fifteen-year-old who arrived at age thirteen with a strong academic background and a fifteen-year-old newcomer who had only two years of prior schooling (Lucas 1997).

Immigrant students of secondary school age, whatever their background, face serious challenges in acquiring English and succeeding in school (Peyton and Christian 1997). The skills they bring with them are not typically highly valued, especially their language. If they are newcomers, they have less time than students who entered the United States during or before elementary school to learn academic English and to master the academic content required to graduate from high school. They are confronted by tests that require English skills they do not have. They must study subjects such as biology, history, economics, and geometry that require high levels of English academic language, using texts and other materials that require a high level of English reading ability. Most secondary schools do not offer native language support for these academic subjects, nor is instruction often provided that accommodates their level of English-language proficiency. The students may also find it difficult to be accepted in well-established groups of English-speaking students (including those who share their country of origin but have been in this country longer). Finally, preparing for life after high school brings additional concerns. If college is in their plans, they must try to succeed in classes that are required for college acceptance and sort out other requirements such as admissions tests and the application process. In the few short years available to them in secondary school, immigrant students are faced with learning (and quickly using) a new language for academic purposes, adjusting to a new life, and making more progress each year than their fellow native-born students in order to meet the expectations of schools.

Secondary schools have, unfortunately, not kept up with the needs of their changing population. These schools are typically characterized by:

- Programs that fail to give immigrant students access to academic concepts and skills. Students need to learn academic content while they are learning English, but typically they are not offered a full educational program. A study in California, for example, found that only six of twenty-seven secondary schools examined provided full coverage of content classes through the native language or through sheltered instruction, to make the

content comprehensible for English language learners (Minicucci and Olsen 1992).

- Few program or curricular alternatives for students with limited prior schooling and low literacy skills. Because of war, poverty, or a variety of other reasons, many immigrant students lack basic skills, though they have had rich life experiences on which they can build formal school knowledge and around which they can shape a successful life in the United States. Development of literacy is a key, and responsive programs are needed to prepare students for opportunities beyond high school in the relatively short time available (Mace-Matluck et al. 1998).
- A school structure that does not ensure smooth transitions from program to program, school to school, or school to college or work. Lucas, Henze, Donato (1990) found that high schools that were successful in working with Latino students provided assistance with such transitions—academic support programs to help students move from bilingual and ESL classes to mainstream classes; guidance counselors to offer assistance in exploring post-secondary opportunities, and so on.
- Teachers and administrators who are not prepared to meet immigrant student needs. All educators who work with English language learners need to know about second language development, cross-cultural issues, and methods to teach both language and academic content. The National Center for Education Statistics (1997) reports, however, that only 30% of teachers in the United States who instruct English language learners have received any preparation in these areas, and only 2.5% have a degree in ESL or bilingual education.
- A lack of appropriate assessment policies and procedures. Assessments in English cannot accurately measure the knowledge or skills of English language learners. Temporary exemptions from testing can have negative consequences (such as preventing students from qualifying for advanced placement courses or certain categories of diplomas). Much attention is focused on assessment issues, but unfortunately few strategies have been implemented with positive results.

Lucas (1997: 1–2) helps us understand these issues better through a glimpse at the life of Eduardo:

He arrived in the United States from Colombia when he was 13, the oldest of three children. His family moved to a poor neighborhood in a poor city in the Northeast. He and his brother and sister went to urban schools that were overcrowded, understaffed, and without human or financial resources to educate the largely poor, immigrant student body. Both of his parents

worked long hours, and as soon as the children were old enough, they helped. . . . The school system did not help Eddie and his siblings develop their native Spanish abilities, nor did it adequately develop Eddie's English writing abilities or give him access to technological skills. While Eddie liked the idea of a career in computers, he had never actually used one, because the school had only a few and his family had none. . . . Eduardo finished high school . . . having completed all his credits with a C-minus average. But to his . . . surprise, he did not actually receive his diploma, because he had not passed the writing portion of the state's high school competency exam.

This is just part of Eduardo's profile, but it illustrates the realities that we need to keep in mind.

**The Program in Immigrant Education.** The Program in Immigrant Education was developed to create ways to respond to the situation described above. With funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a collaborative network of local demonstration projects worked to improve the education of immigrant students at their sites by:

1. improving English language and literacy development,
2. improving mastery of academic content and skills, and
3. improving access to postsecondary opportunities (including preparation for higher education and the workforce).

These were no small goals, of course; the intent was to look comprehensively at schools, policies, and practices, and to design reforms that would lead to success in school and afterward for immigrant students of secondary school age. It was clear from the diversity of situations and students involved that there would be no one single response.

Local demonstration projects were directed by Jodi Crandall from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County; Laurie Olsen from California Tomorrow; and David Ramirez from California State University, Long Beach, who worked with Joy Peyton and others at the Center for Applied Linguistics. The local projects worked with schools in Maryland, northern California, and southern California, in a range of demographic contexts (for example, in one urban district, two-thirds of the students came from Spanish- or Khmer-speaking backgrounds; in another, only about 20% of the students came from homes where English was not the primary language, but they represented over 100 different languages). In each case, school and district educators (teachers, aides, and administrators) formed teams as a central mechanism for reform (called task forces, working

groups, or action teams) (these are described in Adger and Peyton 1999). With the support and encouragement of the outside facilitators, these teams examined their own schools and students, studied relevant research, and identified priority areas for action. Based on emerging findings, we can point to some strategies that show promise of positive effects. These and other approaches are described in Adger and Peyton (1999) and Crandall et al. (in press).

*Accessible Content Courses.* As mentioned previously, it is critical for immigrant students to have access to content that they can understand in courses that advance them toward graduation while they are developing their English language skills. They cannot wait until they learn academic English to study academic content. One option is to increase the availability of subject area courses in the students' primary languages. This option is particularly helpful for recently arrived students with low levels of English proficiency, and it also facilitates the ongoing development and conservation of the students' native languages (Brecht and Ingold 1998).

However, for many reasons having to do with resources and other factors, it is not often possible to offer full curricula in languages other than English in our high schools. One viable alternative is to provide content classes in English that are specially designed for students who are learning English as an additional language. In project schools, new core content courses were developed that were offered by teachers trained in "sheltering" instruction—courses in biology, chemistry, history, and other subject areas that provided credit toward graduation and, in the best cases, formed part of an articulated sequence that allowed students to move through school to graduation. There is a growing literature on effective strategies for sheltered instruction (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2000). Some of the strategies incorporated in project schools included defining both language and content objectives, eliciting student prior knowledge to build on, scaffolding instruction with frequent checks for understanding, incorporating multiple forms of interaction and hands-on experiences, and assessing learning effectively.

In one district in the program, sheltered courses were developed to help students learn material covered by state-level tests required for graduation (among others). At one high school there, ESL students who took the sheltered courses (government and math) passed the state tests at higher rates than the overall pass rate for their school. In another school, new sections of sheltered science and math courses increased access to these subjects for English language learners. (For example, the percentage of tenth-grade ESL students enrolled in science classes rose from 34% to 82% over the three years of the project.) Sheltered courses provide access in at least two ways. First, when these courses exist, students have the opportunity to take subjects that might otherwise not be open to them. Second, by modifying instruction appropriately, the courses give students better access to the content itself.

*Instructional practices for equity and active participation.* All teachers need to develop strategies for working with students at different English proficiency levels. Making classroom routines predictable can allow students to concentrate on the content presented in their second language, rather than struggling to figure out what they are supposed to do. Increasing wait time is another strategy that helps students participate, especially those at early stages of language learning. Giving students five to seven seconds to respond (a big increase for many teachers, particularly at the secondary level) often leads to a wider variety of students participating and longer responses. Such practices are essential to sheltered content instruction, but they can be incorporated by all teachers to improve instruction for English language learners at different proficiency levels.

*Programs for students with limited prior schooling.* Many immigrant students are placed in secondary schools in the United States because of their age, even though they have had little formal schooling and have low literacy and numeracy skills. They cannot participate successfully in age-appropriate grade-level instruction. Refugees who have experienced traumatic events in war or oppression, for example, may have had little chance for schooling before their arrival. Specially designed programs can address their linguistic and social needs and provide academic training to help them succeed.

These programs offer basic skills instruction in a manner that is suitable for adolescent learners. Literacy development is critical, ideally in the native language with a subsequent transfer to English. This allows students to use the cognitive and language resources they already have as a foundation on which to build new skills. Flexibility in time and extending the amount of time of instruction is also important for these students. More opportunities to engage in academic learning, through after-school, weekend, and summer programs are very valuable but often difficult because the students must work or care for other family members.

In one project school, students with limited prior schooling now have access to a sequence of courses focused on literacy that they may follow in addition to their English language classes (Crandall and Greenblatt 1998). Depending on existing skills, students may take the entire sequence or enter where appropriate. The first level is for non-literate students with little formal education; the second builds on the skills of English language learners with low literacy. The third offering provides specially designed instruction for students who already have native language literacy skills or who have taken one of the earlier courses. Project staff report that an advantage of focused literacy classes is that students may progress more rapidly to more challenging English language classes. In the past, they were held to beginning ESL because of their lack of literacy skills. These literacy courses have also assisted the students in passing the state-required functional reading course, which has the added benefit of encouraging them to remain in school.

*Restructuring use of time.* Many project schools found that the typical comprehensive secondary school schedule does not provide optimum learning experiences for immigrant English language learners. Several sites made structural changes in the school day, providing longer blocks of time for class sessions. In one school, three class periods per day of one hour and thirty-eight minutes replaced the traditional day of six periods of fifty-four minutes each. Most teachers and students found the change to be beneficial. Teachers saw fewer students per day for longer periods of time and thus could develop closer relations and better knowledge of their strengths and needs. Students could focus on fewer subjects at one time, which gave them the chance to pursue understanding in depth.

Block scheduling does not, of course, change the need to use time in school effectively. There were some noticeable improvements once the schedule was restructured in the school just mentioned, however. In the first year after restructuring, there were improvements in discipline, grades, and credit accrual (the average number of on-campus suspensions went from 165 per day to 15, for example) (Olsen et al. 1999). Looking at options like block scheduling, as well as other ways of structuring time to fit the needs of immigrant students, can provide a key ingredient to creating optimum learning environments.

*Attention to post-high school opportunities.* Immigrant students and their families often lack information that is taken for granted by those who have grown up in the U.S. school system. Even those who are academically successful may not be aware that college is an option for them, or that steps need to be taken to meet certain requirements in order to be eligible (course selection, admissions tests, and so on). They may not know how to manage the application process or seek financial aid. Changing federal and state policies concerning immigration status and higher education may complicate the picture. Similar information needs arise in career planning.

Project schools found that specific and consistent attention to opportunities beyond high school could make a profound difference in the futures of immigrant students. At one school, task force members developed international councils that began as an after-school club with activities focused on college and career planning for international (immigrant) students. Later, the activities were recognized as important enough to be incorporated into the regular school day. Participation in the councils had profound effects: One year, all twenty-seven seniors who participated applied to and were accepted at universities, many with scholarships. The following year, twenty-nine out of thirty achieved the same result. (In prior years, few English-language learners had applied or even considered college as an option.) Supporting activities increased the impact of these efforts, including the creation of courses to help students prepare for critical tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the SAT. Later, an elective course on preparing for college was instituted as well. Access to information and sup-

portive guidance can open up paths beyond high school that immigrant students would otherwise never know about.

*One school's experience.* To give a snapshot of the impact of these reforms on immigrant students, consider this description from a California high school.

Regular teacher collaboration time allowed ESL, bilingual, and sheltered teachers across academic departments to meet monthly to discuss LEP student issues during the "On-Site meetings." The combination of school reform and the project's focus on LEP students led to providing extended time to learn by encouraging LEP students (and all students) to take a fourth block class and to double up on English until students catch up to their grade level in a sheltered or mainstream class. More time to learn resulted in gaining more credits earned for graduation, higher grades, more access to science and math, and the ability of more LEP students to complete a full college prep English sequence in high school (Olsen et al. 1999: 267).

**Policy Contexts.** The experiences of the projects underscored the impact of policies on our ability to provide strong educational opportunities for immigrant students. The California projects were greatly affected by state-level propositions that were proposed and passed during the implementation of their activities (Proposition 187, which sought to restrict publicly funded services for undocumented immigrants, and Proposition 227, which aimed to end the use of bilingual education for English language learners). While these were particularly dramatic and disruptive, policies at federal, state, and local levels have directly and indirectly affected the opportunities of all immigrant students to succeed and of schools to help them. A few examples will serve to illustrate.

After Californians passed Proposition 187 (even though it was prevented from implementation by ongoing court cases), one project school experienced a 50% drop in the rate of families reporting use of a language other than English at home in the home language survey. The local staff did not believe that the community had changed in any way comparable to the survey results. This survey, a local policy used to assist the placement of students into appropriate programs, was considered dangerous in a climate perceived as anti-immigrant. Families were unwilling to have their children identified as immigrants because of a non-English home language, even if that meant that they did not receive the language services they needed. Thus the local policy, which sought to assist immigrant students, was compromised by the climate created by a state-level policy.

In another example, some school-to-work programs in project schools ran into a compatibility problem with a broader-based policy, in this case at the federal level.

One way to expand post-secondary opportunities for immigrant students is to build career preparation opportunities into the school curriculum through vocational and school-to-work programs. These educational programs with work components are very valuable in providing experience in the workforce. Two issues arise, however, related to the documentation status of immigrant students (a factor that cannot be considered in providing educational services, according to the *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court decision). First, some federally funded programs are by law specifically limited to U.S. citizens and other legal residents (such as the Joint Training Partnership Act; JTPA). Undocumented immigrants are ineligible, but schools cannot discriminate. Second, under a variety of school-to-work programs, employers offer compensation to students who work while they study. However, the Immigration Reform and Control Act requires that employers check to ensure that noncitizens have legal work papers. Schools cannot ask, but employers must. This interface of federal policies and school programs presents a dilemma for schools seeking to help students prepare for the workforce, and it became a troublesome roadblock for some career preparation initiatives in the project schools.

At a more general level, the broad range of language and education policies enacted at federal, state, and local levels create the context within which secondary immigrant students, especially those who are not yet fluent in English, are served by schools (Christian 1999). Laws, regulations, and budget allocations influence the use and learning of English and other languages, as well as the educational options that can be offered to the diverse groups of students in our schools. Policies of all kinds need to be taken into account, from the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to state student assessment policies, to local district policies on providing transportation for students, to an individual school's rules about scheduling classes.

Whatever the level, though, when it comes to language issues, the prevailing orientation is to see "language as problem." For secondary immigrant students and their fellow non-native speakers of English, the orientation is toward eliminating limited English proficiency as a barrier to opportunity. The goal is to "fix" the problem and then these students can join the others in the so-called "mainstream." Maintenance and further development of the language skills they bring with them are not supported (and, depending on the local climate, may be actively discouraged). Language is not viewed as a potential societal resource, with planning and policy-making undertaken to maximize the benefit of that resource. Many speak of the practical limits to our ability to foster growth in so many students and so many languages. However, we have seen in some of our schools that a "language as resource" orientation can make a big difference; where all language skills are valued, their persistence can be celebrated, not lamented.

**Conclusion.** Diversity in our schools is clearly not a passing phenomenon. The situation for secondary immigrant students perhaps crystallizes for us the

critical factors of time, language, and disposition that must figure into reforms that will offer the best opportunities for learning and success for all students.

While we respond to the challenges of diversity, however, we should not lose sight of the promise. In particular, the language skills possessed by immigrants from non-English backgrounds (especially those who are in later stages of language development) constitute a valuable resource for our society that should not be squandered (Campbell and Lindholm 1990). While we bemoan the sad state of competence in languages other than English in the United States, we fail to provide opportunities for speakers of other languages to conserve and develop their language skills as they add English. Instead, we treat their native languages as problems to be overcome, rather than as resources to be further developed. A new orientation in policy and practice could have profound effects. We see some hope in the growing popularity of two-way immersion programs (Christian et al. 1996), where students from two language backgrounds learn together in classrooms and a goal is bilingualism for all students.

The Program in Immigrant Education has demonstrated that comprehensive reforms can be developed and implemented that make secondary schools more responsive to the needs of immigrant students, giving them access to experiences, language skills, and subject area knowledge that will help them succeed in school and beyond. This paper offers only a glimpse of what has been learned through the program. More of the details (and first-hand accounts) can be found in the publications listed in the references and at the web site of the Center for Applied Linguistics ([www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)).

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