Language of Educational Instruction for

English Language Learners

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School Issue Paper- EDUC 621
April 2, 2014
Students in a high school English class were given the assignment to write a paper about someone who helped them through a difficult time. One of the students, Maria (name has been changed), was born in the Twin Cities to immigrant parents from Mexico. She spoke purely Spanish until entering Kindergarten where instruction was given in English. Since then, Maria became fluent in both Spanish and English. She speaks both languages without an accent and easily reads in both English and Spanish. However, when writing the paper for this English class she made errors common to second language learners. In part she wrote “Another time is having him help me with school work. School adds alot (sic) of stress to me. Especially when I have a these due dates to remember so many tests to study for so much homework to do… [he] would show me to be a great person…” (H. N. Audelo, personal communication, November 1, 2010).

As shown in the example above, even when a first or second generation immigrant has a basic command of the English language, she will often struggle with the demands of academic writing. Many studies have examined immigrants to identify the best way to teach English learners (ELs) in the schools while, at the same time, they are gaining a stronger command of the English language. Teaching techniques range from immediate immersion into English to teaching in the student’s native tongue over an extended period. The English Language Acquisition Act of 2001 (ELAA) stated that “the primary objective of U.S. schools should be the teaching of English without any attempt to preserve minority languages”. The ELAA replaced the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 which sought to preserve the minority language (Spring, 2012). But is total immersion, as written into the ELAA, the right direction to go in supporting ELs? Integrating the EL into a bilingual program provides them with the greatest opportunity for long term educational success and English fluency.
Background

The United States has seen an ever increasing number of ELs entering the public school system. In 1990 there were two million ELs in the United States. Twenty years later that number had grown to more than 11 million (Baker, et al. 2012). Also of note, in 1960 the student population in the United States was 80% white. By 2010 that number had dropped to 57%. Nearly half of the remaining students were immigrants who were not fluent in English (Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). ELs have a wide range of English proficiency, making it more difficult to identify a one size fits all solution.

Besides the process of learning a second language, there are cultural issues that the EL must address. Each language comes with its own culture and norms. Accepting a second language implies that the individual is also accepting the culture and identity that comes with that language (Palmer & Martinez, 2013; Calderon, Slavin, & Sanchez, 2011). For many immigrants, this culture change is a stumbling block that needs to be addressed, along with the need to learn English, for their academic advancement.

Findings for Immersion Programs

Many advocate immersing ELs directly into mainstream classrooms. This method could also be called the sink-or-swim program. There are a number of benefits to immersion programs. Students receive content-based instruction from day one. This can be an important driver for immersion programs since knowledge “is represented in a way closely tied to the specific language of instruction and/or learning” (Saalbach, et al, 2013). Further, a goal of content-based instruction is to keep the EL moving forward with her class. In an immersion
program, the EL has greater exposure to English and will be motivated to quickly learn the new language so that she can communicate (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

To demonstrate the benefits of language immersion, a group of students was studied to find the cognitive effects of receiving instruction in one language and retrieving it in another. The study showed that when communicating solely in either their first language or a second language, the students processed information quicker and more accurately than if the instruction and retrieval were in separate languages (i.e. taught in second language, information retrieved and demonstrated in first language). This study supported the need to stay in one language, supporting immersion programs. (Saalbach, et al, 2013).

There are also a number of drawbacks to immersion. Many researchers have shown that it takes a minimum of five to seven years to become fluent in a second language. The length of this learning curve is influenced in part by the individual’s reading and academic knowledge in her first language. During this time period the EL may struggle to keep up, lose motivation to continue, and ultimately drop out of school. Disadvantaged ELs are especially susceptible to dropping out, which would have lasting effects emotionally and economically (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Spring, 2012). In the immersion scenario, there is also a great deal of pressure placed on the teacher to help the new EL succeed. Two proposals to help in the teaching process are modifying instructional strategies to meet the needs of the EL and requiring teachers to learn a second language (Palmer and Martinez, 2013). Both proposals would add stress to the teacher and teaching process.
Findings for Bilingual Programs

When a student enters a new school for the first time, be it kindergarten or advancing to high school, there is a great deal of emotions attached to that experience. One emotion is stress. Forcing the student to learn in a new language adds greatly to an already stressful situation and can be a recipe for disaster. Bilingual education allows a student to transition over time into her new academic language.

There are a variety of approaches to bilingual education. All approaches include the goal of “protecting minority languages while teaching English to non-English speakers” (Spring, 2012). Within that context, some approaches are designed to allow the student to retain her first language, while other approaches transition the student to English over time. One such transitional program starts with up to 80% of instruction in EL’s first language during the first year. Then, the percent of first language instruction is reduced over several years until all instruction is done in English (Baker, et al, 2012). This approach allows the student to further her education while integrating into the English language and culture.

Baker, et al, (2012) did a longitudinal study of immigrant children entering elementary school and tracked them over a three year period. This study was comprised of 214 ELs with half of the students enrolled in an immersion program and the other half in a transitional bilingual program. The students’ English reading fluency and comprehension were tested regularly during the study. In the first year of the study there was little difference in reading fluency or comprehension between the two groups. The second year showed a significant jump in fluency and comprehension within the bilingual group. In the final year, the immersion group made greater strides in comprehension, so that in the end both groups had similar comprehension
results. The gap in reading fluency between the two groups continued to grow in the third year. At the end of the third year the students in the bilingual program read at a rate of 105 words per minute. At the same point in time the immersion students read at 95 words per minute. In summarizing their findings, the authors of the study stated, “that a [transitional] bilingual approach to improve reading outcomes of Spanish-speaking English learners may be as effective as an English-only approach, with the added benefit of students becoming bi-literate and bilingual” (Baker, et al, 2012). This approach also allows the immigrant time to integrate into the culture of the new language.

Although there are many benefits to bilingual programs, it doesn’t come without its own set of issues. A study within the Chicago Public Schools demonstrated that if a student remains in bilingual programs “long-term,” there is a greater possibility that he will fall behind his peers, have low course grades, more course failures, and highest number of absences (Harris, 2012). This is a major reason why most bilingual programs have the goal to transition the students within three years. For teachers and administrators there are also issues. Most notable is the lack of appropriate teaching material in the student’s first language. Also, many administrators lack understanding of second language acquisition. This can result in decisions that may not be the best for the students or teachers (Harris, 2012).

Conclusion

Both immersion and bilingual programs have many benefits as well as issues. Some of the issues can be easily addressed, while others (i.e. lack of teaching material in languages other than English) are long term. Both programs have shown positive results in the academic
achievement of ELs. In summarizing their research, Calderon, Slavin, and Sanchez (2011) stated that the effectiveness of the teacher is more important than the method of teaching ELs.

The teacher and her teaching methods are crucial to the success of the EL. However, there are two major advantages of the bilingual program. First, bilingual programs slowly integrate the EL into American language and culture. This allows the student to have a period for transition and adjustment to the new language culture. Second, ELs in a bilingual program show improved reading fluency. Both of these advantages weigh heavily on the long term success and stability of the EL: emotionally, socially, and economically.

Although immersion is currently a popular and the legislated technique, the risks to the EL and teacher are too great. Bilingual education programs should be implemented for English Learners.
References


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