

Do Native Language Services Help or Hinder English Language Learners?

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Background:

By nature, I am a skeptical person. I came into the Read Well program unconvinced that instruction in a non-English language, or English as a Second Language (ESL) services was the most effective path for English Language Learners (ELLs). I chose to look up longitudinal data on the various bilingual programs to see for myself if there is credible data showing if bilingual programs that have been going on actually help ELLs. From the class, I have become convinced that, theoretically, bilingual programs were good, but not necessarily in practice.

My Research Method:

I consulted my professor, Barb Marler, for researchers in the field of bilingualism. She steered me towards Virginia Collier. Being the skeptic that I am, I felt that anyone in the field of bilingual education has a predisposed bias for bilingual services. So, I wanted to look at a wide variety of research, always keeping in mind the credibility of the source and any possible bias.

Overview of Thomas & Collier's 2003 Study:

Thomas & Collier's 2003 study titled, "A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students' Long-Term Academic Achievement" contained detailed information about 5 varied school districts' ELL services and analysis of student data and their achievement. Inferential data was drawn from the types of services these ELLs received in a 5-year span and

their percentile rankings were compared with native English-speaking students on district standardized testing. Research-based recommendations from the findings were also in the report.

In my quest to find out if bilingual services help, not hinder ELLs, I struck a gold mine with this study. I looked up information on the group that funded this study, and I was surprised to see that it was sponsored, indirectly, by the United States' Department of Education. The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) appears to be a very credible research institution whose focus is to analyze the myriad of educational services provided for ELLs in U.S. public schools and the consequential long-term achievement effects on these students.

This particular study is CREDE's most recent overview of U.S. school programs for ELLs' and the resulting long-term academic achievement from kindergarten through twelfth grade. The purpose of this study was to help federal and state government officials and local school districts make informed, research-based decisions on school programs for ELLs. This study was a five-year endeavor, from 1996 to 2001. Five research sites were chosen throughout the U.S. The sites ranged from urban to rural and were located in all quadrants of the U.S. (Collier, 2003). The students in the study represented more than 80 primary languages. Three of the 5 schools in the study had mostly Spanish-speaking ELLs, which is of particular interest to me.

Many variables were taken into consideration for every one of the over 210,000 students in CREDE's overview: number of years of formal schooling in

L1 and in what type of program, socioeconomic status, L1 and L2 upon entry of school, and prior formal schooling.

The study analyzed efficacy of many language programs. “Overall, these school districts provide a very rich picture of variations in schooling for English language learners” (Collier, 2003). The programs studied include 90-10 two-way immersion, 50-50 two-way immersion, 90-10 developmental bilingual education, 50-50 developmental bilingual education, 90-10 transitional bilingual education, 50-50 transitional bilingual education, and English as a Second Language taught through academic content. I would have liked the study to include literacy-based ESL pull-out as one variable and English immersion without support **and** without prior L1 schooling as another variable.

Thomas and Collier came up with a number of recommendations based on their study to help districts make sound decisions for their students. They found that Enrichment 90-10 and 50-50 one-way and two-way developmental bilingual education are the only programs found to “assist students to fully reach the 50th percentile in both L1 and L2 in all subjects and to maintain that level of high achievement, or reach even higher levels through the end of schooling. The fewest dropouts come from these programs” (Collier, 2003).

Specific Recommendations from Thomas & Collier’s Study:

Effective Native Language Programs

Programs for ELLs need to be well planned. To be effective, “Bilingual/ESL Content programs must (show improvements)...of at least 3-4

NCE gains per year more than mainstream students are gaining per year, they also must be “well implemented, not segregated, and sustained long enough (5-6 years) for the typical 25 NCE achievement gap between ELL and native-English speakers to be closed. Even the most effective programs can only close half of the achievement gap in 2-3 years, the typical length of remedial ELL programs. Therefore, short-term, remedial, and ineffective programs cannot close the large achievement gap and should be avoided” (Collier, 2003), but, I think short-term ESL Content/Bilingual is better than no L1 services.

Patience is a virtue when waiting for results from dual-immersion programs. The increased performance is not usually seen until the high school years after many years of dual-language training. Collier’s research states, “When ELLs initially exit into the English mainstream, those schooled all in English outperform those schooled bilingually when tested in English. But the bilingually schooled students reach the same levels of achievement as those schooled all in English by the middle school years, and during the high school years the bilingually schooled students outperform the monolingually schooled students.” I think this fact is amazing! This points to the additive advantage of being fluent in two languages. Instead of teachers seeing non-English speaking students as a liability, with this fact widely known, teachers would see them as an asset to improving district scores.

Further pointing to the efficacy of bilingual programs, is the finding that “students who receive at least 5-6 years of dual language schooling in the U.S. reach the 50th NCE/percentile in L2 by 5th or 6th grade and maintain that level of

performance, because they have not lost any years of schooling” (Collier, 2003). Armed with this information I can no longer wonder if long-term bilingual programs help students or not.

The following finding changed my mind that native language instruction is only for students who aren't fluent in English. “Students raised in a dual language environment need at least 4 years of schooling in L1 and 4 years of schooling in L2 to achieve on grade level in either of the two languages” Providing bilingual schooling in the U.S. meets both needs simultaneously, typically in 4-7 years, leading to high academic achievement in the long term” (Collier, 2003). This information again points to the efficacy of dual-immersion schooling for yet another group of students – those who appear to be fluent in English and another language.

Ideally, an enrichment bilingual/ESL program would have the following components. Collier's findings indicate that the program must meet students' developmental needs. These needs include cognitive, emotional, social, physical, as well as language needs in both native language and the second language. “Schools need to create a natural learning environment in school, with lots of natural, rich oral and written language use by students and teachers (L1 and L2 used in separate instructional contexts, not using translation); meaningful, “real world” problem-solving; all students working together; media-rich learning (video, computers, print); challenging thematic units that get and hold students' interest; and using students' bilingual-bicultural knowledge to bridge to new knowledge across the curriculum” (Collier, 2003).

Remedial Programs

Collier and Thomas recommend that when remedial programs are only what a district is willing to offer, care must be made to make sure that the students achievement is as high as possible, as measured by NCE, before placement in English mainstream classes. This is because their research shows that the time of reclassification is likely to be the students' highest achievement level during their school years. "Ideally, instructional gains are best accomplished in an enrichment (not a remedial) program" (Collier, 2003).

Parents Who Refuse Native Language Services:

In addition to finding the most effective programs for ELLs, the researchers recommend that parents who refuse bilingual or ESL services for their children should be made aware that their children's achievement in the long-run will most likely be much lower as a result of not receiving language services.

Native-English Speaking Students

Some of the research gives recommendations for native-English speaking students as well. "Bilingually schooled students outperform comparable monolingually schooled students in academic achievement in all subjects, after 4-7 years of dual language schooling" (Collier, 2003). This points to dual-immersion programs as a way to increase achievement for all students.

Students with Prior Native School Education

Many students immigrate to the United States after receiving at least 4 or 5 years of grade-level L1 schooling in their home country. These students “typically reach the 34 NCE (23rd percentile) by 11th grade when schooled all in English in the U.S. in an ESL Content program, and then the mainstream. These students are on grade level when they arrive, but it takes them several years to acquire enough English to do grade-level work, which is equivalent to interrupting their schooling for 1 or 2 years. Then they have to make more gains than the average native-English speaker makes every year for several years in a row to eventually catch up to grade level, a very difficult task to accomplish within the remaining years of K-12 schooling.” (Collier, 2003). This gap is even harder to bridge within an ESL Content program because even “the highest quality ESL Content programs close about half of the total achievement gap” (Collier, 2003).

Contradiction in Practice for ELLs?:

In regards to students who enter school with no English proficiency, Collier and Thomas emphatically warn against placement in short-term programs that are only one to three years in duration. The researchers found that ELLs need at least four years to reach grade-level performance in their second language. So, this would point to the need for dual-immersion, or bilingual classrooms for a minimum of four years for students entering school without any English. This rule would apply to students of all ages. If that is the only option available, I

wonder if students who arrive without any English proficiency would not be better off in an English classroom right away. In each grade level, there is at least one teacher who is sensitive to the needs of students who don't yet speak English.

There could be training for teachers on how to best help these students and materials provided to facilitate L1 development as well as L2 proficiency. If it is highly discouraged to place non-proficient students in a short-term program, then why even have that short-term program as an option at all? Yes, it would be best to have these students in a dual-immersion program or a more long-term program, but if that's not happening in certain districts, then why stunt these students' achievement in a program that is shown to be ineffective?

Maybe my question would be better aimed at the federal government. Why does the government accept scientifically ineffective programs? Why do these programs satisfy federal requirements for servicing the ELL population? I guess this shows that there are many sociopolitical effects on educating students whose primary language is not English. As we've discussed in class, sometimes lawmakers who are unconnected to education, make legal doctrines based on limited knowledge and, sometimes, incorrect information. To calm my frustration at this inconsistency, I will remind myself that I am in this program to become more aware of language acquisition so that I can be informed and I can then inform others and advocate for effective programs for ELLs.

Criticisms of Thomas & Collier's Research

I like knowing both sides of an issue before I make a decision, so I Googled

Collier's work. I searched for "Virginia Collier" and "criticism" and I didn't find anything credible or persuasive. I read a report entitled, "Mystery on the Bilingual Express: A Critique of the Thomas and Collier Study". I was hesitant to read it because I was glad to be convinced of native language instruction's positive effects in real schools. I was afraid that I might read something to sway me back to ambivalence about the efficacy of native language programs. This report was a critique of the 1996 Collier and Thomas study. That study was about 90 pages long compared to the over 300 pages of the 2003 report. So, some of the criticisms were negated in the current study. Some of them are valid concerns. For example, the study didn't include data on students who were submerged into English without any services (Rossell, 1998). I wondered this even before reading the critique. After thinking about it, it may have been because the goal of the Collier study is to see which programs produce **bilingual** students. The English submersion program doesn't have bilingualism as a goal. I still would be interested in seeing the results of English achievement in the submersion program, though.

Studies to Collaborate Thomas & Collier's Results:

Smaller studies of ELL programs have been done which show, at worst, neutral effects of L1 instruction (Bialystok, 2002). At best, instruction in L1 has been shown to push the ELLs ahead of even their native-English-speaking peers (Hones, 2002). In Eugene Garcia's Hispanic Education in the United States: Raices y Alas, he cites a review of 33 studies to discern common threads of

schools that lead to high academic performance for ELLs. The conditions that are relevant to my search for data supporting bilingual education from August and Hakuta's 1997 study include "a customized learning environment (and) use of native language and culture in instruction" (Garcia, 2001). Both of these attributes are most feasible within a L1 program.

The National Research Council summarized twenty years of research to find the most effective reading instruction for students who enter school with Spanish as their primary language. The report emphasized "reading development of English by nonnative English speakers whose first language is Spanish is most effective by providing reading instruction in the child's first language" (Slavin, 2004). Another study, done by McLeod in 1996, of effective schools throughout the U.S. that serve students with diverse primary languages and socioeconomic statuses found, among other things, that one of the common goals in these exemplary schools was to "utilize native-language abilities to develop literacy that promoted English-language literacy development. Programs in these schools were more interested in this mature development than transitioning students quickly into English-language instruction. This approach paid off in English-language development at levels that allowed students to successful in English instruction" (Garcia, 2001). Yet another study with the same goals in mind as McLeod's also found that the "more comprehensive the use of the primary language, the greater the potential for linguistically diverse students to be academically successful" (Miramontes, 1997).

Professional Implications:

1st Implication:

Advocate for dual-immersion and/or long-term bilingual classes for students who are not yet proficient in English, students who are proficient in English and another language, and, in the case of dual immersion, native English speakers.

Research shows that these are the most effective programs to increase achievement for ELLs. Dual-immersion has been proven to raise native-English speakers' achievement as well.

If a district is concerned about raising test scores, this could be persuasive information to inform program decisions. Also, most districts are concerned about money, and not only are these programs most effective, but they are also the most cost-efficient. As we have discussed in class, pull out ESL is the costliest, not to mention, least effective option.

2nd Implication:

Use available resources to develop native language skills in students.

I can use available resources to enrich native language skills. I can bring community members in who fluently speak the native language to discuss higher-level ideas pertaining to current content. The community members could come in one or two times per week and discuss these ideas for 15 or 30 minutes. I can also inform parents at parent-teacher conferences that it is very important that their child discuss content and have rich discussions in the native language. I

can also encourage them to have their children read books in the native language at home, and to write letters in the native language to family members (Bialystok, 2002). I can obtain more books in the native language for students to read and bring home, and I can encourage multilingual students in my class to check out books in the native language from the library. As I have already been experimenting with, I can have students discuss abstract content-related concepts in the native language with peers who speak the same native language (Hones, 2002). This strategy develops students' native language skills and the students have a higher chance of deeply understanding the concept by talking about it in their thinking language.

Implication #3:

Continue researching and learning about language acquisition.

After doing the research for this paper, I see that there is a wealth of information on the Internet about issues pertaining to ELLs, some credible, others not. It is exciting to recognize names now on some of the research and articles. On the READ Institute website, one of the main consultants is Linda Chavez, whom I remember from classroom discussions on English Only propositions. Knowing some background about Chavez, helped me to recognize the bias that the website contained. Taking classes and workshops from the IRC will also help me become more knowledgeable about language acquisition and best practices for ELLs.

Conclusions:

Overall, there is more evidence to point to the effectiveness of dual-immersion and long-term bilingual programs. No one study will be perfect, but Collier's, in particular, was very thorough and persuasive. Now, when people I know verbalize their doubts about native language instruction, I know where to point them to gain an informed opinion. Most importantly, I know where I stand on native language instruction.

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