



Policy Brief on Effective Instructional Programs for English Language Learners

by

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This policy brief summarizes a research report written for the Laboratory for Student Success, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory. That report examines effective instructional programs for English language learners (ELLs)—students whose first language is not English but who are either beginning to learn English or have demonstrated some proficiency in English. The report found that there are several types of effective instructional programs that improve the academic success of ELLs. Many of these programs are supported by systematic, long-term studies and reviews of research. The research evidence indicates that implementing effective instructional programs will enhance the educational outcomes of ELLs. Four types of effective instructional programs are outlined in the following sections.

Bilingual Education

Bilingual education is designed to provide access to the general school curriculum for speakers of “minority” languages by using the students’ native language almost exclusively in the early stages of schooling. As students matriculate in the bilingual education program, their native language use is reduced and the dominant language increases until all instruction is provided in the “majority” language. In the United States, the vast majority of bilingual education programs provide native Spanish speaking children with academic content in their native language. Each successive year in the program relies more and more on the delivery of academic content in English until around the 6th year of schooling, when students have transitioned into all-English instruction. At this point, students are literate and quite proficient in the academic use of the native language (e.g., Spanish).

Research evidence indicates that bilingual education has been an effective instructional program for many of its millions of participating students. Evaluation studies, however, are not uniform in reporting that bilingual education

results in more advanced English speakers. Many educators ardently believe that children will learn English faster if it is introduced early. While the research evidence does not always support that point of view, even the most vocal defenders of bilingual education argue that children in U.S. schools need high oral language and literacy levels in English. As useful and successful as transitional bilingual education programs have been, they recently have been losing ground to other models. These models, such as two-way bilingual education, often remove walls of segregation between bilingual and regular education students, as well as introduce English at an earlier age in some cases.

Bilingual Immersion Programs

Bilingual immersion programs are designed to teach students the oral and written form of a second language while maintaining and developing the first language. Bilingual immersion differs from bilingual education because it balances students’ use of native and target languages even at the early stages of schooling. In addition, immersion programs are typically concerned with teaching a minority language to majority students.

Although most of the research on immersion programs comes from the French Canadian immersion program, perhaps the most widely cited report on the evaluation of language education models in the United States is that of Thomas and Collier (2001). They found that either transitional bilingual education or immersion programs are the most effective programs for ELLs. This report does not necessarily distinguish among bilingual programs, but instead places several programs in a single category, best represented by those who support native language instruction. Thomas and Collier conclude that “the strongest predictor of L2 [second language] student achievement is [the] amount of formal L1 [first language] schooling. The more L1 grade-level schooling, the higher L2 achievement.”

Two-Way Bilingual Programs

Two-way bilingual programs are similar in instruction to bilingual immersion programs. However, the most common form of two-way bilingual programs requires that roughly half of the students in a class speak one of the target languages; the other students are native speakers of the second target language. Another key difference in two-way programs is that such programs typically begin all students' school experience in the language spoken by the speakers of the non-dominant language. For instance, in many two-way bilingual programs (Spanish/English) in the United States, the primary language of instruction in the early grades is Spanish. Two-way bilingual education specialists often concern themselves with the ratio of Spanish to English instruction at each successive grade level (e.g., 90% Spanish, 10% English in kindergarten, a 50/50 split by Grades 5 and 6).

In their longitudinal report comparing several language education programs, Thomas and Collier (2001) found that the most effective program for enhancing English skills for ELLs is the two-way bilingual program. Their data suggest that two-way program participants score almost a full standard deviation higher on measures of English literacy at the 11th grade than their transitional bilingual education counterparts. However, other studies that have focused on local evaluations of two-way programs have shown less dramatic results.

School-Based Intervention Programs

In recent years, a number of school-based prevention and intervention programs have been found to be effective for ELLs. Success for All (SFA) is one of the largest comprehensive reform programs for elementary schools serving students at risk of academic failure. The program's philosophy is that children must succeed academically and that it is possible to provide school personnel with the skills and strategies that they need to ensure academic success for students. SFA is an intervention that begins early in the student's academic life, a key goal of which is to have students reading at grade level by the end of third grade. It utilizes a great deal of tutoring. Tutoring takes place in 20-minute blocks and is done by certified teachers. Student progress is monitored on an ongoing basis. The program also includes a reading component for students whose native language is Spanish. Evaluations of SFA have indicated that the program has demonstrated consistent positive results for Hispanic students (Lockwood, 2001; Slavin & Madden, 2001).

Three other programs have been found to be effective for Hispanic students. The Reading Recovery, or Descubriendo La Lectura, program is an early-intervention tutoring program that focuses on the lowest achieving readers in the first grade. Students receive one-on-one tutoring for 30-minutes per day for 12–20 weeks.

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Project (VYP) has been an effective intervention for Hispanic middle- and high-school students who are at risk of dropping out (Lockwood, 2001). Selected students become tutors for elementary-school students and work with the elementary-school students four days per

week. On the fifth day, the tutors participate in a class that strengthens their academic skills, as well as their skills as tutors.

The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program is another successful program for older (Grades 6–12) Hispanic students (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996), placing low-achieving students believed to have college potential in the same college preparatory courses as high-achieving students. AVID students receive special counseling, tutoring, and other academic support such as instruction in study skills, writing, and test-taking strategies.

Syntheses of research on effective school-based programs for Hispanic students and ELLs have found that there are several characteristics common to successful programs (Fashola, Slavin, Calderón, & Durán, 2001; Lockwood, 2001). Effective programs typically (a) have well-specified goals, (b) provide ample opportunity for teacher professional development, (c) begin early and are maintained throughout the schooling experience, (d) include ongoing assessment and feedback, (e) incorporate the use of tutors and other support staff, and (f) focus on the quality of implementation.

Conclusion

The disagreements over instructional language program models typically revolve around the amount and length of native language instruction and whether such instruction helps children to learn English. These arguments may continue because the valuing of students' native languages is often based on social judgments rather than empirical evidence.

Curricular-based programs, such as SFA, are becoming more common, but are not without their own detractors. As long as ELLs' academic performance falls short of their native counterparts, educators will continue to search for instructional programs that best suit the needs of ELLs.

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