

## Bilingual Education: An Effective Solution for English Language Learners

One in every nine students today speaks a native language other than English, and it has been predicted that within the next twenty years, non-English speaking students will become as common as one in every four students (Goldenberg 10). The increase in the number of non-English speaking students raises an important question about how to effectively give each student a good education while helping him or her learn English. Two basic forms of education typically used in schools today for English language learners (ELLs) are English immersion programs and bilingual education programs. English immersion courses spend all or most of the class time teaching in English. In bilingual Education courses, on the other hand, students are taught content in his or her native language while learning English. The two main forms of bilingual education are traditional programs, the most common form of bilingual education which teaches in the native language and immerses ELLs in mainstream English classes after three years, and developmental bilingual education, which teaches in both the native language and English and lasts up to 7 years (Donagen 54). The main goal of English immersion is to attain English proficiency, while the main goal of bilingual education is to develop literacy in both the native language and English (Webb, Metha, & Jordan 221-222). Although I don't completely disagree with English immersion because it is somewhat effective, I argue that bilingual education is the most impartial and effective method for almost all English language learners.

Supporters of English immersion claim that it is a more effective method because it allows non-English speaking students to learn English at a quicker rate. They think bilingual education just delays the process. According to Dr. Goldenberg, Professor of Education at Stanford University, it generally takes at least 3 years to reach an intermediate level of proficiency (12). But in some states, including California and Arizona, students are required to attend mainstream English classes after only one year, which is why the rate of proficiency is so important (Goldenberg 12). Supporters of English immersion want to place non-English speaking students into English classes as quickly as possible.

While English immersion classes allow students to learn the new language faster, rushing them into learning a second language can create problems in proficiency later. Bilingual education is more effective in the long run. Students in bilingual education courses learn English at a slower pace, but tend to be much more proficient in the language later in life. English immersion mainly focuses on the language while bilingual education allows the student to learn the language as they focus on the area content. Supporters of English immersion would say that the sooner we immerse ELLs completely in intensive English courses, the sooner they will pick up on the language and the better their English proficiency will be later. While that sounds reasonable, learning a second language doesn't quite work that way. By advancing proficiency in their first language, they can more easily transfer knowledge across languages. According to multiple studies performed by the National Literacy Panel, bilingual education promotes higher achievement levels in reading in the student's second language (Goldenberg 14). It is important for teachers to still take into account the student's language limitations in their first language.

The short term benefits of English immersion programs are very appealing, but bilingual education provides better long term benefits.

One short term problem associated with bilingual education is standardized testing. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed in 2001 required annual standardized testing in grades 3-8 (Jost 1032). The NCLB Act requires that each school meet certain goals, or adequate yearly progress, which helps determine the school's funding. The tests are given in English, which is another reason the rate of proficiency is important. Supporters of English immersion claim that immersion programs better and more quickly prepare students for standardized tests. Because immersion programs teach English to ELLs at such a quick rate, I can agree that they are more effective in preparing students to at least understand some of the material in the tests.

However, standardized testing still sets non-English speaking students up for failure, whether they are in immersion programs or traditional bilingual education programs. Title I, the root of the NCLB Act, provides funding to schools with "disadvantaged" students (No Child Left Behind Act); its purpose is to "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" (Title I). Its purpose is also its biggest flaw in standardized testing because all students take the exact same tests, including students with learning disabilities and ELLs. Standardized testing is another debate within itself, but pertaining to English language learners, there should be forms of the tests in other languages that cover the same content. Even students in English immersion programs score poorly on standardized testing; they learn English at a fast rate, but they miss out on parts of the area content because they're so focused on understanding the language. Claude Goldenberg, professor at Stanford

University who served on the National Panel, described an example of how ELL scores in general tend to be low:

On the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), fourth-grade ELLs scored 36 points below non-ELLs in reading and 25 points below non-ELLs in math. The gaps among eighth-graders were even larger – 42 points in reading and 37 points in math. Those are very large gaps. (Goldenberg 11)

The problem isn't which type of education better prepares ELLs for standardized testing; it is the fact that different forms of standardized testing are not provided to accommodate for ELLs which sets them up for failure, regardless of which form of education is used.

Critics of bilingual education claim that English immersion is more effective because bilingual programs have a shortage of qualified teachers. It is easier to find teachers for English immersion because they need little or no knowledge of the student's native language. Many school districts are struggling to keep up with the increasing numbers of ELLs. In addition, cuts in funding of bilingual education have also contributed to worsening teacher shortages. For example, in 1996, 38.5 million dollars was cut from the previous 195.2 million dollar budget for bilingual education programs, and funding still continues to decline (Glazer). With an increase in the demand for bilingual teachers and a decrease in funding, we continue to have a teacher shortage for bilingual education, and to some it may seem like an easier solution to just place students in English immersion programs instead.

All teachers should have some training in a second language, especially since the rate of non-English speaking students is predicted to reach one fourth of the school population within the next 20 years. Because English immersion classes spend all or most of the class teaching in

English, little or no knowledge of the student's native language is required of the teachers; that could negatively impact the students. ELLs are placed in mainstream English classes eventually, but they aren't necessarily proficient enough in English to comprehend some of the vocabulary specific to the course. When ELLs merge into English-speaking classes, teachers should be prepared to assist their special learning needs. Also, there is a solution to the lack of funding for bilingual education; if teachers take preparation courses for bilingual education, their schools are more likely to receive extra funding. For example, Kansas State University (KSU) constructed a year-long plan for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers to train mainstream teachers on how to work with ELLs. KSU received a boost in district funding for "participation of teachers and administrators in the program for ESL endorsement" ("Preparing to Serve" 17). Just because there is a shortage of bilingual teachers, that doesn't make English immersion a better option. English immersion teachers aren't necessarily fully qualified to help ELLs because they know little about the student's native language.

When deciding which method of education is more effective for ELL students, the most crucial aspect is academic achievement. Bilingual education provides the students with the same challenging curriculum as English-proficient students while teaching them English separately, whether it is a separate class or a period of time at the end of the class to review in English. The main focus of English immersion is on the language. In order to transition successfully into mainstream classrooms, the student must learn "academic English" rather than conversational English to understand the course content. Academic English involves "possessing and using content-specific vocabulary and modes of expression in different academic disciplines such as mathematics and social studies" (Goldenberg 9). Testing doesn't usually show much of a

difference in test results between immersion students and bilingual education students until secondary school. Two professors at George Mason University – Dr. Wayne Thomas, specialist in evaluation methods and statistics, and Dr. Virginia Collier, researcher in English as a second language (ESL), bilingual, and dual language education – studied high school achievement levels of students in different types of educational programs in 35 districts (“Wayne P. Thomas.”; “Virginia P. Collier”). Their findings show that the scores of dual-language students were higher. Thomas concluded that English immersion students “look as though they’re doing really well in early grades but they’ve experienced a cognitive slowdown as they’re learning English” (Jost 1035). The short term effects of English immersion are appealing, but when it comes to academic achievement, bilingual education is more beneficial.

Also, when deciding on an education program for English learners, we must be sure not to take away from the student’s culture. We need to teach them English to successfully transition them into mainstream English classes, not to assimilate them into our own culture. Bilingual education produces students with the gift of bilingualism, but English immersion doesn’t allow the student to finish developing their first language. By placing these students in all-English classes too early, the pressure of being forced to suddenly learn a completely new language and being immersed into a different culture makes the student lose their sense of identity. Native Americans, as an example, suffered language extinction when the federal government tried to assimilate them into mainstream society and took an English-only approach, which some refer to as “language genocide” (Jost 1040). Ineé Yang Slaughter, executive director of the Indigenous Language Institute says it “is not just a language issue, it is an issue of cultural identity being

lost” (Jost 1041).The best way to ensure that students are not separated from their cultural roots is through bilingual education.

Everyone deserves a right to a fair education, regardless of his or her race, gender, language, ethnicity, etc. The number of English learners in the United States is rising quickly, and we must find the best way to provide them with the education they deserve. Although English immersion programs and bilingual education programs are both effective forms of education for ELLs, bilingual education has more beneficial long term effects on the individual, and that’s what matters most. In order to successfully provide ELLs with a fair education, we should supply more funding to bilingual education and revise standardized testing under NCLB to ensure that ELLs are being tested fairly. We should also support their differences in culture. We consider ourselves a diverse country, yet we pressure anyone who is different to become more like the “ideal” American. We need to focus on what’s most important: properly educating non-English speaking students.

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