

RECENT IMMIGRANTS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM: IMPROVING CONTENT LEARNED

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“It is a common experience that when translated to a town where [a student’s] native language is not spoken children will become reasonably proficient in the new language in the space of six months. It is equally common experience that after six years of schooling in a second language, whatever the teaching method, most children emerge with a very poor command of the language. The first set of experiences shows that children are possessed of a very powerful device for learning languages; the second set of experiences shows that the school harnesses this device only in a most inadequate manner.”^[1]

Immigrant students face many challenges to successful learning which are unique to them. They come here most often speaking a language other than English. This is the main obstacle they face in succeeding in school. “Children who don't understand English don't understand the instruction of core curricular subjects. If they don't receive instruction in their native language while acquiring English, they'll fall behind academically.”^[2] This paper looks at current methods used to teach English language learning (ELL) students and which work best for teaching the most content to the students so that they graduate with an equivalent base of knowledge compared to their native-English speaker peers.

Oftentimes immigrant students are assimilating to American culture at school while at home they follow the customs of to the country of origin. When immigrants, students or adults, quickly assimilate to American culture, a breakdown of cultural values and of the community support network usually follows. The higher the acculturation of the immigrant, the more likely drug use is. This is explained by “the ready availability of drugs [and] their recreational use tends to be condoned among large segments of the native population.”^[3] Still looking at the acculturation process and its effects, a “study found that a pervasive sense of cultural heritage was positively related to mental health and social well-being among both immigrants and native Mexican-Americans.”^[4] When schools facilitate the lost of cultural heritage through their teaching methods or atmosphere, they increase the risks of English language learners (ELL) for mental illness.

How Challenges Affect School Success

These challenges, both those which explicitly affect learning progress (i.e. the language barrier), and those which only affect it implicitly (i.e. rapid acculturation) all affect classroom performance. Students who do not understand English fall behind in the

course work at first because they don't understand what the teacher is saying and after they have a better grasp of English, their class has moved ahead and they now need to catch up.

Assimilation has long been seen as the purpose of public schooling for immigrant children. It was meant to further the metaphor of the "melting pot" of America instead of the cultural mosaic. When quick assimilation occurs the framework which was used to keep kids in line in the old country breaks down. In part this is because parents and children can't communicate with each other as well as they could before because as the children learn English, they lose their skill in their native language and the same barrier which hurts their school work now hurts their home life and support network. Clearly, these extra-academic circumstances do not have a beneficial effect on classroom learning.

When the main focus in class is learning English, the content is often ignored. This puts the students at a disadvantage, for, while they are progressing in their mastery of English, they remain stagnant or lose ground in the subject areas such as history, math, science, and other subjects. So, in classes for ELL students, not just English needs to be taught, but the core subjects which mainstream students learn as well.

There is not one magical method that will help all students. Each state and each district must evaluate their ELL population and decide if one method would work in all of the schools and if not, which method(s) is/are best for which school(s). Even further, each teacher must evaluate his or her classroom and decide which method is best for the make up of the class.

Limited English Proficiency Teaching Methods

In transitional bilingual education, the content areas are taught in the native language for 2-3 years (though some studies suggest that 5-7 years is better^[5]) while students are learning English. After they are proficient enough in English, they are moved into mainstream classes.

Mexico Example

In Mexico, a comparative study of transitional bilingual education versus immersion was conducted. Both sets of schools were in non-Spanish areas and both taught oral and written Spanish as well as math. In it, the federal and state schools taught immersion and the National Indian Institute schools taught transitional bilingual. The federal and state schools are better funded and are better funded are compared with schools of the National Indian Institute which have teachers with less training and receive less funding. Both types of schools teach students for whom Spanish is not their first

language. One difference between the teachers is that state and federal teachers are recruited from recent normal school graduates and could not speak the local language where they taught while Institute teachers are recruited from local Indians who, of course, spoke the local language where they taught.

The federal and state schools taught only in Spanish and the Institute schools “insisted upon literacy in the mother tongue and some oral Spanish prior to instruction in reading in the national language [Spanish]. [...] The children in the bilingual Institute schools scored significantly higher on the reading comprehension test.”^[6] When looking at these results put together with the fact that the Institute teachers’ “professional preparation was sketchy. Spanish was a second language, and their ability to read and write init varied from poor to only fair. These were the teachers who were more successful [at teaching Spanish literacy],” the argument for bilingual education, especially for the first few years of instruction is especially compelling. “The federal and state teachers had better professional preparation.” They “knew Spanish as their mother tongue and read and wrote in it with ease.”^[7]

So, we can “see that reading comprehension in the national language was more effectively achieved when approached through the vernacular than when all instruction was given in the national language.”^[8] This study can be applied to the United States, especially in classes where a majority of the ELL students speak the same language. This method would work for all students, especially older ones who are beyond the age where language acquisition is easier.

ESL

Since many classes in America have multiple foreign languages spoken in them, the above method would not be practical. English as a second language (ESL) is a method of teaching ELL students which is most practical in classrooms where more than five languages are spoken. It gives the classroom at least one common language which everyone can communicate in, though the first few months, and sometimes years, are difficult. ESL is included in all bilingual education, though “some provide specialized instruction in English with little or no native-language support for content-area instruction. Such ESL programs are most common in schools and systems in which students speak several different native languages.”^[9] In ESL, the main goals are speaking, comprehension, reading, and writing in English.

“The writing of English should start early in the elementary grades. If the child is non-English-dominant, he should be taught the early skills in his dominant language during the first year of school.” Though this seems similar to the transitional bilingual method, the duration of bilingual teaching is shorter and more emphasis is made on learning English. ESL can take on many forms, in the following version of ESL, “children with

limited English skills spend half days in a regular classroom taking courses like math and music that require little English. This gives them a chance to be around American children and hear them talk. During reading and social studies, which demand better English skills, pupils who need help go to their own classes.”^[10] This version of ESL is used in an elementary school that is in a county where 55 languages are spoken in their schools and English is the only language that all students will know. This method would work best for elementary school classes, the younger the better.

Maintenance Bilingual Education

In maintenance bilingual education, the purpose is not only to teach ELL students English, but to maintain the native language as well. In achieving this goal, this method is ideally carried out from kindergarten through graduation and is bilingual throughout. However, “local conditions and available resources generally temper that ideal.”^[11] Teachers should not repeat material in both languages, but switch between the two languages when appropriate.^[12] ELL students should not enter this type of program after first grade unless they are already proficient in both languages or they are receiving extra tutoring in their non-native language outside of class. This is one of the drawbacks to this method: students must enter it at a young age, and thus enrollment will only decline with each grade level passed, not grow.

Two-Way Enrichment Bilingual Education

Two-way enrichment bilingual education mixes native English speakers and those for whom English is their second language. Both types of students learn from the other and learn content as well. “At Holbrook Elementary, Arab immigrants spend half days in a classroom where only English is spoken. For the other half, the Arab students move, to a room in which subjects are taught only in Arabic, with added instruction in Arabic-language skills.” Their English speaking counterparts do the reverse. Arab students sing American songs in English and English-speaking students learn the Arabic names for the days of the week. “‘Outside the classroom, the Arabic students speak English,’ says teacher Mohammed Hussein. ‘They help Tommy with Arabic, and he helps them with English.’” The main concern with this method is that English-speaking and ELL students will lose ground with their English skills. At this school, “At the end of a year's instruction, scores for [Arab] students who had studied Arabic were higher in reading, math and English-language skills than those for non-participants, though the students' scores had been lower when school began.”^[13]

Similar to the maintenance bilingual method above, two-way enrichment bilingual education is best when everyone begins it at a young ages (kindergarten or first grade). Due to the alternating language days in this particular program, starting it when students were a bit older would work, so long as they received extra tutoring in the

language foreign to them. For this method to exist, you need a large body of students who are interested in learning both languages and also enough teachers who are fluent in each language. This method is more elitist than the maintenance bilingual approach because it attracts English speakers who are choosing to learn another language and not simply ELL students whose parents wish them to maintain their native language in addition to learning English, which is necessary in society.

Structured Immersion Classes

Lastly, in structured immersion classes, “students are assigned to specialized English-language classrooms in which content-area instruction is adapted to their level of English proficiency. Supplementary tutoring in their native language sometimes is provided for the first year or two, either by a teacher who speaks the students’ native language or by a bilingual aide.”^[14] Common to English immersion classes, all classes are taught in English, though unique to some programs, the teachers are fluent in their students’ native languages. The teachers use the native languages “only when students do not understand. Children with problems can ask questions in their language, which will be answered.”^[15] In those classes, test scores are found to be comparable to students who are in bilingual programs. Some studies report that students in immersion classes learn more English-skills than those in the various bilingual programs yet the same as students in ESL. Other studies (of K-6 students) “have shown that, on achievement tests in the sixth grade, children who receive strong primary language and ESL instruction outperform students who receive English-only instruction.”^[16] However, immersion classes and ESL classes are supposed to be better at teaching full fluency in English, as opposed to the partial fluency those studies find with the bilingual programs. Also, “recent work finds that first and second generation Hispanic immigrants who received [a form of bilingual education] at some point during their education earned significantly less ten years after high school than their peers.”^[17] Finally, from an administrators point of view, immersion classes and ESL are cheaper and easier to implement because they don’t require as much foreign language knowledge as the bilingual methods.

Implementation

Some of these methods may be implemented by individual teachers regardless of the policies of their school or district, others need the full support of school, district, and sometimes even state policies and funding. The structured immersion method and the ESL method are both capable of being implemented by teachers. The teachers would need to teach themselves the language(s) their students speak, at least enough to answer questions or for simple explanations of instructions. Teachers, especially in public schools, face enormous time and resource constraints, so this scenario isn’t very likely except in the case of very zealous teachers, but the option is out there for them. For the

other methods, the support of all levels of administration is important for successful implementation.

***Note: This paper assumes that teachers receive the proper training for whichever method (not including language training) and that the system will not be abused (i.e. putting Chinese students in Spanish-English bilingual classes or using methods as a way of segregating students).

Annotated Bibliography

Barnett-Mizrahi, Carol; Trueba, Henry T. Bilingual Multicultural Education and the Professional, Newbury House Publishers, Inc., Rowley, MA: 1979. p. 284.

This book contains several essays on bilingual education. Below, I will list and summarize the essays I used.

Lozano, Anthony Girard. "The Role of ESL in Bilingual Education: Objectives and Implementation," p. 295-299.

A quick explanation of the goals of English as a second language and how those goals may be accomplished. This includes some methods and concepts which are not simply theoretical but which could be used in the classroom. However, it also takes the distant perspective of an administrator or policy maker.

Modiano, Nancy. "The Most Effective Language of Instruction for Beginning Reading: A Field Study," p. 282-288.

This essay looks at a field study of how two different sets of schools teach students who don't speak Spanish to read, write, and speak Spanish and also teach them math. More specifically, it compares the federal and state schools (which use immersion) with the National Indian Institute schools (which use transitional bilingual). The conclusion is that the Institute schools, which have fewer resources than the government schools, do a better job of teaching the students.

Bozzone, Meg. "Which is best: bilingual or English-only?," Instructor: March 1995 v104 n6 p15(1) (interview with Prof. Alfredo Schifini of California State University, Los Angeles)

This article examines what diverse schools can do to provide bilingual education to students so that they can keep up academically while continuing to learn English. It especially takes into account tutors and paraprofessionals in the classroom.

Building an Indivisible Nation: Bilingual Education in Context, Alexandria, VA: April, 1987. p. 19.

This book gives a brief overview of bilingual education in the United States. It has concise summaries and explanations of the different types of bilingual education along with their benefits and drawbacks. It is a primer on bilingual education.

Mora, Marie T. “English-Language Assistance Programs, English-Skill Acquisition, and the Academic Progress of High School Language Minority Students,”

Policy Studies Journal: Winter 2000 v28 i4 p721

This article is heavy with study cites and critical of bilingual education methods of teaching; it favors structured immersion and, to some extent, ESL. The author summarizes at a wide range of data on the effects on ELL students of different methods during school and after graduation.

Portes, Alejandro; Rumbaut, Ruben G. Immigrant America, University of California Press ,Berkely, CA: 1990. pg.328.

The main focus of this book is on the successive waves of immigrants, their similarities and differences. It is full of statistics and charts. It also does a very good job of discussing nearly every facet of immigration, from their reasons for leaving their home country, to the struggles they found here, to their patterns of settlement.

Solorzano, Lucia. Educating the melting pot, U.S. News & World Report: March 31, 1986 v100 p20(2)

This article looked at four different communities in the US and four different ELL methods of teaching. It has brief explanations of each type along with short anecdotal profiles of each method as implanted in its particular location.