

# What the Research Says About Effective Strategies for ELL Students

By: Rhonda Barton (2007)

Meeting the needs of English language learners is a challenge that's widely felt in the Northwest. Half of the region's 1,103 school districts report enrolling ELL students. In 91 of those districts, English learners represent more than a quarter of all students and in another 37 districts, ELLs fill half the seats.

Beyond any social implications, the performance of these students can carry a disproportionate amount of weight in an educational era dominated by No Child Left Behind. According to the Urban Institute, two-thirds of ELL students nationally come from low-income families. Consequently, an ELL student who does poorly on state achievement tests can potentially affect a school's adequate yearly progress standing in as many as three categories: Limited English Proficiency, low income, and racial/ethnic. As the Center on Education Policy (Rentner et al., 2006) points out, "This leads to greater pressure on schools, districts, and states to rapidly increase the English proficiency and academic performance of English language learners in order to improve the performance of three subgroups."

The question then becomes, how is this goal best accomplished?

## Assessing Prop 227

Two states — California and Massachusetts — restrict bilingual instruction and require English learners to be taught overwhelmingly in English. California's Proposition 227, which passed by statewide referendum in 1998, established structured immersion as the default program for instruction. ELL students undergo sheltered/structured immersion during a "temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year" and then transfer to mainstream English language classrooms.

A five-year evaluation of Proposition 227, conducted by the American Institutes for Research and WestEd (Parrish et al., 2006), was released in January 2006. After tracking data from 1.5 million English learners and 3.5 million English fluent and native English-speaking students in California, the researchers concluded that "there is no evidence to support an argument of the superiority of one English learner instructional approach over another." Among the study's other findings were:

- Since Proposition 227, students across all language classifications, in all grades, have posted gains on state achievement tests. But, other reforms such as class-size reductions and the climate of increased federal and state accountability make it impossible to attribute these gains to any one factor.

- The gap between ELL students and native English speakers has remained virtually constant in most subjects and in most grades.
- Less than 40 percent of English learners are likely to meet the criteria to be reclassified as fluent/proficient after 10 years in California schools.

The study goes on to say that while there's no one path to academic excellence, several critical factors do contribute to success for English language learners. These include staff capacity to address ELL students' linguistic and cognitive needs; school wide focus on English language development and standards-based instruction; shared priorities and expectations; and systematic, ongoing assessment with use of data to guide instruction.

## **Case for Dual Language**

The work of Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas of George Mason University seems to challenge the assertion that there's no one path to academic excellence for ELL students.

After 20 years of program evaluation research involving almost two dozen large and small school districts in urban, suburban, and rural settings in 15 states, Collier and Thomas (2004) write passionately about the "astounding effectiveness" of dual-language immersion.

In what they term a "wake-up call to the field of bilingual education," Collier and Thomas point to evidence that "enrichment dual-language schooling closes the academic achievement gap in L2 and in first language (L1) students initially below grade level, and for all categories of students participating in this program." They go on to say, "This is the only program for English learners that fully closes the gap."

According to the researchers, when students enter mainstream classes and leave special remedial programs (including intensive English-only classes such as those in California and Massachusetts, ESL pullout classes, ESL content/sheltered instruction, structured English immersion, and transitional bilingual education), they may continue to make academic progress — but only one year at a time, as do typical native English speakers. And, they may make less than a year's progress each year in secondary school when the cognitive demands are greater. In order to make more than one year's progress in each year and effectively close the achievement gap, Collier and Thomas maintain that ELL students need curricular mainstream instruction through two languages.

Collier and Thomas also believe that the dual-language approach has an added benefit: "[It] can transform the experience of teachers, administrators, and parents into an inclusive and supportive school community for all."

## **Another View**

Looking at research spanning the last quarter century, Fred Genesee of McGill University and his colleagues (2005) also found "strong convergent evidence that the educational

success of ELLs is positively related to sustained instruction through the student L1 [native language]. In both descriptive and comparative program evaluation studies, results showed that length of time in the program and time of assessment affect outcomes."

Examining 200 studies and reports, the researchers homed in on oral language development, literacy, and academic achievement. They reported that when students in the early years (K-3) of a bilingual program were tested, they typically scored below grade level. However, later assessments (at the end of elementary school and in middle and high school) revealed that "educational outcomes of bilingually educated students, especially in late-exit and two-way programs, were at least comparable to, and usually higher than, their comparison peers" (p. 375). The studies also showed that the longer the students stayed in such programs, the better they did.

According to Genesee and his coauthors, research consistently confirmed that ELL students who received any specialized program, such as bilingual or English as a Second Language instruction, were able to catch up to or surpass the levels of their ELL and English-speaking classmates in English-only classrooms. Citing Thomas and Collier's seminal 2002 study, they stated that "students who participated in an assortment of different programs and those who received no special intervention performed at the lowest levels and had the highest dropout rates."

In conclusion, Genesee and his colleagues maintain: "Taken together, these results indicate that ELLs are more successful when they participate in programs that are specially designed to meet their needs (ESL, bilingual, etc.) than in mainstream English classrooms and when the program is consistent throughout the student education" (p. 374).

## **The Benefits of SIOP**

Jana Echevarria, a professor at California State University, Long Beach and principal investigator with OERI's Center for Research on Excellence, Education & Diversity (CREDE), makes a case for the use of sheltered instruction to boost achievement for ELL students. A developer of the empirically validated Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (see [Training Blends SIOP and Equity Components](#)), Echevarria asserts that SIOP offers a model for systematic implementation of high-quality ELL instruction rather than the "pick and choose" approach to sheltered lessons used by some teachers.

Writing in the February 2006 issue of *Principal Leadership*, she reports on one elementary school where "chronically underachieving students made consistent and significant yearly gains on standardized tests when the SIOP model was implemented to a high degree by all teachers." Eighty-six percent of the third-graders who were enrolled in the school during the three years that SIOP was implemented scored at or above grade level on state assessments.

Based on her research, Echevarria characterizes effective ELL practices as focused instruction that contains explicit content and language objectives; frequent opportunities to interact with the teacher and other students; and explicit vocabulary development with words repeatedly written, pronounced, modeled, and used in context. She makes the distinction between social or conversational English and academic English, noting that "teachers often assume that because students can converse well in English, they should also be able to complete academic tasks and assignments." That is a false assumption, given studies that show conversational ability can be acquired within one to three years while academic proficiency can take between five and nine years to develop.

## **Interweaving Strategies**

Further support for the practices emphasized by Echevarria can be found in a synthesis of 34 research studies compiled by Hersh Waxman of the University of Houston and Kip Tellez of the University of California, Santa Cruz (2002). The studies— most of which were qualitative and involved a limited number of classrooms – highlighted seven teaching strategies that were effective for ELL students: collaborative learning communities, multiple representations, building on prior knowledge, instructional conversation, culturally responsive instruction, and technology-enriched instruction.

Waxman and Tellez argue that these practices are not separate but can — and should — be used simultaneously. Thus, teachers can help students improve their language skills by working in small groups while using technology or by linking culturally responsive lessons to prior learning.

In the end, the researchers stress that "the most important issue related to effective classroom instruction is not the form it takes but the quality of the instruction." Teachers must perform these practices well, set high expectations for ELL students, and offer a warm and supportive classroom environment.

## **Far-Reaching Consequences**

By improving outcomes for the growing population of English language learners, educators not only address the demands of NCLB but the greater human consequences. As the Pew Hispanic Center (2002) points out, "In the United States today people with more education tend to live longer and healthier lives, remain married longer, and earn more money." Hispanics — who make up 75 percent of the language minority students in the United States — drop out of high school at twice the rate of their white peers and are less likely to go on to postsecondary education. With the projection that Hispanics will make up half the population under the age of 18 in this country by the year 2020, it becomes ever more critical to give them — and other ELL students — the education they need to succeed.

### [References](#)

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Click the "References" link above to hide these references.

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