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The Case for Structured English Immersion

Three states and many school districts are finding that emphasizing English language instruction offers ELLs an accelerated path to success.

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When Arizona voters passed a ballot initiative in 2000 that required all English language learners to be educated through structured English immersion (SEI), the idea seemed simple enough: Teach students the English language quickly so they can do better in school. But as other states, districts, and schools that have contemplated an SEI program have learned, the devil is in the details. As it turns out, the simple goal to "teach English quickly" frequently evokes legal wrangling, emotion, and plain old demagoguery.

Few people would disagree that English language proficiency is necessary for academic success in U.S. schools. Less clear, however, is the optimal pathway for helping language-minority students master English. Conflicting ideologies, competing academic theories, and multiple metrics for comparing different approaches have rendered many schools, districts, and educators paralyzed by confusion. Bill Holden, principal of a California elementary school in which ELLs are three-fourths of the student population, told me, "At a certain point there were just so many mixed messages and contradictory directives and policies that we didn't really know what to do."

Despite the controversy, however, many schools in Arizona and other states have implemented structured English immersion or are in the process of doing so. As I have worked with educators, school boards, and the Arizona English Language Learners Task Force to explore, design, and implement structured programs, a common theme emerges: These programs have the potential to accelerate ELLs' English language development and linguistic preparation for grade-level academic content.

Why Do Schools Implement Structured English Immersion?

Several factors usually account for school and district leaders' decisions to opt for structured English immersion. In three states (California, Arizona, and Massachusetts), the reason is straightforward: Laws passed through voter initiatives now require structured English immersion and restrict bilingual education.

Another factor is that most state student performance assessments are conducted in English, and schools or districts that miss targets face increased scrutiny and possible sanctions. This provides added incentive for schools to get students' English proficiency up to speed as soon as possible.

A third factor is the burgeoning subpopulation of ELL students who reach an intermediate level of English competence after a few years—and then stop making progress. These students (more than 60 percent of all ELLs in some districts, according to analyses I conducted for 15 districts) possess conversational English competence. But they lag in their ability to apply the rules, structures, and specialized vocabularies of English necessary for grade-level academic coursework; and their writing typically features an array of structural errors. My analyses showed that the typical intermediate-level ELL scores well below proficient on state-level tests in English language arts.

Some educators have acknowledged, in fact, that intermediate English competence is the logical outcome of their current practices and program designs. "Once we really analyzed our program for ELL students," one district superintendent told me, "we saw that we really didn't teach English to our students. We were teaching *in* English, but not really teaching English."

Confusion About Structured English Immersion

Keith Baker and Adriana de Kanter (1983) first coined the term *structured English immersion* (SEI) in a recommendation to schools to teach English to non-native speakers by using program characteristics from the successful French immersion programs in Canada. In 1991, J. David Ramirez and his colleagues conducted a voluminous study of ELL instructional programs and found that SEI programs shared two basic components: (1) teachers maximize instruction in English and (2) teachers use and teach English at a level appropriate to the abilities of the ELLs in the class (Ramirez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991).

Since then, many people have taken a crack at defining structured English immersion. The definition presented to voters in Massachusetts was similar to those used in election materials in California and Arizona: "Nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003, p. 7).

But when Arizona's English Language Learner Task Force began meeting in late 2006, it found that few people seemed to know what SEI should look like. Many teachers, academics, and school administrators who testified before the task force had a negative view of the state-mandated approach. Presenters frequently confused SEI with *submersion*, the process of placing ELLs in regular classrooms that feature little or no instructional modifications and minimal instruction in the actual mechanics of English. Others viewed SEI as synonymous with specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE), also known as *sheltered* instruction, which features an array of strategies designed to help students of intermediate or higher proficiency access grade-level subject matter (Aha!, 2007).

Experience Fills in the Details

Notwithstanding the hodgepodge of definitions, mixed messages, and underlying emotions, educators have implemented structured English immersion programs at both the elementary and secondary levels. A framework for effective SEI is emerging that includes the following elements.

Significant amounts of the school day are dedicated to the explicit teaching of the English language, and students are grouped for this instruction according to their level of English proficiency. In Arizona, all ELLs must receive four hours of daily English language development. Other states and districts also provide large amounts of explicit instruction in English. For example, in Massachusetts, students at the lowest levels of English competence receive a minimum of two and one-half hours of daily English language development.

Grouping students for English-language instruction according to their English language ability is an important component of SEI because it enables teachers to effectively design language lessons. True beginners, for example, can benefit greatly from a direct lesson on common nouns, whereas intermediate students need to understand how subordinating conjunctions are used in academic writing.

The English language is the main content of SEI instruction. Academic content plays a supporting, but subordinate, role. The dominant focus is language itself: its rules, uses, forms, and application to daily school and nonschool situations and topics. The operant principle is that students must have a strong understanding of the English language before they can be expected to learn grade-level content.

Massachusetts, for example, tightly defines English language development instruction as "explicit, direct instruction about the English language intended to promote English language acquisition by LEP students and to help them 'catch up' to their student peers who are proficient in English" (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2006, p. 2).

Martin Ramirez, principal of a Yuba City, California, high school that has gained national attention for its SEI program, puts the language-content issue this way:

We are charged with giving our ELLs a rigorous core content curriculum that is comparable to their English-speaking peers. But just putting them in a science course does not make it a rigorous curriculum. They will get access when they possess the language skills to be able to understand the content, and that is the role of our SEI program.

English is the language of instruction; students and teachers are expected to speak, read, and write in English. Accelerated language programs like SEI are based, in part, on the *comprehensible output* theory (Swain, 1985). This means that we cannot expect students to advance their language competence mainly through oral comprehension; instead, students get more proficient in English when they actually try to produce increasingly complex English language sentences. All materials and instruction in SEI programs are in English. For this reason, teachers and instructional support staff are not required to be able to speak a language other than English.

Although controversial, the limit on use of students' home languages keeps the goal of SEI programs clear. One administrator in an Idaho district summarized the rationale: "Unfortunately, our ELD classrooms in the past sometimes featured as much Spanish as English. It was just sending a very confusing message to students and staff."

Teachers use instructional methods that treat English as a foreign language. Structured English immersion programs reject the notion that teaching *in* English is the same as *teaching* English and that complex language skills can be learned through osmosis. SEI's foreign-language orientation calls for active, direct, and explicit instructional methods. Students have abundant opportunities to learn and produce new and more complex English language structures.

Students learn discrete English grammar skills. In SEI classrooms, teachers try to accelerate students' natural tendency to acquire language by providing grammatically focused lessons that raise students' conscious awareness of how English works while engaging them in relevant, age-appropriate learning tasks. Students are overtly taught English pronunciation and listening skills; word building; word-order rules; a wide range of vocabulary (synonyms, antonyms, survival vocabulary, academic word groups); and formulaic expressions not easily explained by grammar analysis ("There you go again"; "What's up with that?"). The overt teaching of verb tenses—almost nonexistent in most traditional public school English language development programs—is typically the anchor of many of these programs, accounting for up to one-fourth of the total instructional time.

Rigorous time lines are established for students to exit from the program. English language learners have little time to waste. While they are learning English, their English-proficient classmates continue to move ahead. For that reason, most SEI programs are designed to last one academic year. An SEI graduate should possess a foundational understanding of the mechanics, structure, and vocabulary of English that enables him or her to meaningfully access core content.

These SEI program graduates, however, are not finished learning English. Indeed, until students are reclassified as *fluent English proficient*, they are entitled to support services. In Yuba City, for example, when students exit the SEI program, they are enrolled in a mixture of sheltered and mainstream courses, including one period of advanced English language development. Federal law requires that students who have been reclassified be monitored for a two-year period.

Charting New Territory

Each of these program elements in some way runs counter to the assumptions and beliefs that have guided ELL program development throughout the last 30 years. In Arizona and elsewhere, advocates of structured English immersion face strong criticism from detractors who argue, among other things, that these programs are segregatory, experimental, not based on research, nonculturally affirming, damaging to students' self-esteem, and perhaps even illegal (Adams, 2005; Combs, Evans, Fletcher, Parra, & Jiménez, 2005; Krashen, Rolstad, & MacSwan, 2007).

Proponents of SEI maintain that students can learn English faster than many theories suggest,

that grouping students by language ability level is necessary for successful lesson design, and that the research support for immersion language-teaching methods and program design principles is solid (Arizona English Language Learners Task Force, 2007; Baker, 1998; Judson & Garcia-Dugan, 2004). As for the question of self-esteem, SEI advocates point out that ELLs are motivated by measurable success in learning the fundamentals of English, as well as by the improved reading comprehension, enhanced writing skills, and higher levels of achievement in core subjects that come from these enhanced language skills.

On the legal front, ballot initiatives requiring SEI programs have been found to comport with federal law. Under the federal framework, as articulated in *Castañeda v. Pickard* (1981), immersion programs are viewed as "sequential," in that their goal is to provide foundational English skills before students participate in a full range of academic content courses.

SEI Programs in Action

George Washington Elementary School in Madera, California, enrolls more than 500 English language learners in grades K–6. Located in the middle of a Spanish-dominant portion of a town in central California, the school was a magnet bilingual education site for decades—and unfortunately one of the lowest-achieving schools in the district. The school missed state and federal academic performance targets for years, and fewer than 3 percent of ELLs annually were reclassified as fully English proficient.

District data analyses showed that after the first full year of SEI program implementation, the school gained almost 30 points on state test metrics, and English language growth rates tripled in all grades, easily exceeding district and federal targets. The reclassification rate last year quadrupled to 12 percent. Perhaps most significant, almost 50 percent of the school's intermediate students advanced to the next level of proficiency or met the criteria for being fully English proficient. Before the SEI program, 70 percent of the school's ELL population regularly showed no English language growth—or even regressed—on the state's yearly English assessment.

Here's what an average day looks like for an ELL student at George Washington Elementary School:

- Pronunciation and listening skills, 20 minutes.
- Vocabulary, 30 minutes.
- Verb tense instruction, 20 minutes.
- Sentence structure, 20 minutes.
- Integrated grammar skills application, 20 minutes.
- English reading and writing, 60 minutes.
- Math (specially designed academic instruction in English), 40 minutes.
- Science, social science, P.E., 40 minutes.

At Yuba City High School in Northern California, almost half of the school's 450 ELLs test at

intermediate or below on the state's language assessment. These students are enrolled in four periods of daily English language development courses: Conversational English and Content Area Vocabulary, English Grammar, English Reading, and English Writing. The school offers three levels for each course; students take an assessment every six weeks that could qualify them to move to the next level. Some students move so quickly that they exit the SEI program in less than a year. After the first year of Yuba City's SEI program, the proportion of students reclassified as fully English proficient tripled to 15 percent, nearly twice the state average.

Rethinking Assumptions and Beliefs

Not surprisingly, the decision to implement a structured English immersion program—whether by law or by choice—frequently brings about conflicts over ideology, pedagogy, and the very role of schooling for English language learners in a culturally and linguistically diverse society. Notwithstanding these challenges, an increasing number of schools, districts, and states across the country have seen that structured English immersion can help students gain the English language skills that are crucial for academic success and opportunities beyond school. As Adela Santa Cruz, director of the Office of English Language Acquisition Services for the Arizona Department of Education, said,

We understand that implementing an SEI program requires some new ways of thinking and teaching, but once teachers and administrators come to understand SEI, they see it as a positive and effective vehicle for helping ELLs learn English much faster than we thought.

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