

A Case for Structured Immersion

Research in two U.S. school districts indicates that *structured* immersion in English has enduring effects with low-income, language-minority children.

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Bilingual education came of age in 1974 when the U.S. Supreme Court reached the unanimous decision in *Lau vs. Nichols* that public schools must provide special assistance to students who enter school with limited English proficiency. It was no longer legal to merely place language minority students in conventional classrooms where all instruction was conducted in English. However, in the *Lau* decision, the Supreme Court did not recommend any specific educational model for serving these students.

Within a short period of time, the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, on the advice of an expert panel, developed guidelines for school districts to follow. These so-called *Lau Remedies* specified that language minority students should be taught academics in their primary home language until they could effectively benefit from English language instruction. This *transitional bilingual education* model has been the predominant mode of instruction for language minority students over the past decade, in part because of monitoring of districts by the Office of Civil Rights. The model has a strong common sense and humane appeal; it seems logical to teach students reading, math, and language arts in their native language. Districts can point to classes being conducted in Spanish, Vietnamese, or Hmong as a visible sign that they recognize the needs and rights of language minority children.

However, in recent years, doubts have been expressed about the efficacy of this model for the students served. A controversial evaluation by Danoff (1978) found no difference in achievement between Hispanic stu-

dents in transitional bilingual programs and Hispanic students taught without it. For both groups, norm-referenced test scores in math were below the 30th percentile and were at the 19th percentile in reading. A more recent review of 39 evaluation studies prepared for the U.S. Department of Education (Baker and de Kanter, 1983) concluded that transitional bilingual education has had minimal success and that there is no empirical evidence to support its use.

Baker and de Kanter called public attention to the promising research findings from Canada on *structured immersion*. With structured immersion, all instruction is done in the commonly used language of the school (English in the U.S., French in

Canada). However, *all instruction is conducted at a level understood by students*. Superficially, structured immersion may seem similar to what the U.S. courts outlawed in 1974; that is, a sink-or-swim approach for those not proficient in the language of the dominant culture. But there is a critical difference: teachers do not assume that the children understand English. Difficult new words are pretaught, sometimes using the child's native language. According to Baker:

Language minority students in effect learn English instruction as they learn math, and learn math through English instruction that is understandable at their level of English proficiency. In short, practice makes perfect, and English is best learned by using it as much as possible through the school day (1984, p. 2).



The Case Against Immersion in the U.S.

Despite documented success of the immersion model in Canada, the majority of bilingual educators are adamantly opposed to its use in the U.S. Tucker, one of the researchers involved in a classic study conducted in Quebec (Lambert and Tucker, 1972), told the U.S. House of Representatives that the situation is totally different in the U.S. and that immersion would not work here. Santiago, in the March 2, 1983, *Education Week*, said that "the immersion method has only been tried with middle class children." His statement is not accurate; the bulk of the Canadian research was with low-income students.

Critics of immersion argue that whereas English is a valued "minority" language in Canada, Spanish (or Vietnamese or Laotian) is not highly valued in the U.S. Further, Lambert argues, "To place such children in an initially all-English instructional program would be to misapply the immersion process in a harmful, subtractive way." He claims that typical compensatory education models will not work. The only salvation is transitional bilingual education, involving introduction of a

... separate English language instructional component when it is certain that the child's home language has taken root and it is a secure base for starting the buildup of English, a stage that may not be reached until a child enters the 2nd or 3rd grade (Lambert, cited in Baker, 1984, pp. 5-6).

The Paradox of Transitional Bilingual Education

Lambert's argument touches what seems to be a logical paradox in the model: if students do not begin to read in English until the 2nd or 3rd grade, how will they ever catch up with their English-speaking peers? If they complete elementary school reading two to three years below grade level, how will they cope with the demands of middle (or junior high) school and high school? Or will they drop out of school?

Lambert maintains that compensatory education models will not work for language minority students. Our contention is the opposite—that empirically proven, compensatory education models will work with this population, if the program is en-

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hanced by the intelligent use of a structured immersion approach. Two such programs are currently in use.

The Uvalde Program

Uvalde is a small town in Texas, approximately 40 miles from the Mexican border. In 1968, the school district joined Project Follow Through, a federal compensatory program for low socioeconomic children in the primary grades. As part of Follow Through, each district selected one of 20 different educational models. Uvalde selected the Direct Instruction Model (Becker and others, 1981).

The highly structured Distar Reading, Language, and Arithmetic are the backbone of the program. All academic instruction in these areas is conducted in English; no prior knowledge of English is assumed. Teachers and paraprofessionals translate problematic words into questions phrased in the child's native language. The carefully controlled vocabulary in the direct instruction programs allows teachers to "preteach" any new words that come up in the math, reading, or language lessons.

Ninety-eight percent of the students in the program are Hispanic; 60 to 80 percent are classified as limited English proficient upon entry.

The majority of the 15 teachers and all 15 paraprofessionals are bilingual. Eight of the current teachers were formerly paraprofessionals who received teacher training through Follow Through; all eight are parents of students who have completed the program. There is a high rate of parent and community involvement in the program, which has been in existence for 16 years.

Evaluation of the Uvalde Program

The fact that Uvalde is a small community and that virtually all of the lowest income students and the majority of limited-English-proficient are in Follow Through has affected the nature of the program evaluation. It was impossible, for example, to find a comparison group in Uvalde with equivalent students. Thus, a range of quasi-experimental evaluation designs was used. The evaluation results are presented in a technical report by Gersten and others (1984). Only highlights are reported here. The measure of the program's effectiveness is in the weight of the data—its consistency across cohorts over 11 years.

The children evaluated were Uvalde students who attended Follow Through classes for three full years. Students were tested on the Metropolitan Achievement Test at the end of 3rd grade. The Uvalde Follow Through students achieved *above or near the national normal on the language subtest of the Metropolitan Achievement Test*. The language subtest measures the use of written English (usage, tense, punctuation, and basic grammar). From 1973 through 1983, all but three of the 11 cohorts of students scored above the national norm; five cohorts scored above the 60th percentile.

In Total Math, students again performed *at, near, or above the national median level* for the same period. Six of the 11 cohorts scored at or above the 45th percentile on the Total Math. In 1978, Danoff reported that low-income Hispanic students tend to perform at the 30th percentile in math computation. Uvalde students scored significantly above this level not only in computation but in language related skills such as math problem solving and math concepts.

Reading performance was assessed with two measures, the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) and the Metropolitan. The former is a test of oral reading; the latter tests comprehension and English language vocabulary. The median score over the last decade has been at the 30th percentile on the Metropolitan reading. Scores in each of the last two years have been at the 34th percentile. While the reading scores are lower than the math scores,



they are still above the levels reported by Danoff (1978), who found low-income Hispanic students in bilingual programs at or below the 20th percentile.

Longitudinal Research: Enduring Effects of the Uvalde Program

Two studies were conducted to see whether the three-year program had any enduring effects. The first (Becker and Gersten, 1982) looked at program effects two and three years after the students had left the 3rd grade and were in conventional 5th and 6th grade classrooms.

The comparison group was similar to the Follow Through students on an array of demographic variables (family income, primary home language, number of siblings, and mother's education). The results showed strong, consistent effects in several important content areas. Significant effects were found in oral reading on the WRAT,

and on the Metropolitan's math problem solving, math concepts, and science tests. *None* of the outcomes on any of the WRAT or MAT subtests significantly favored the comparison group, and 31 percent favored the Uvalde Follow Through group. These results demonstrate that skills children have truly mastered (such as written English and word attack skills) do not diminish after students leave the program. Effects were greater for math problem solving than math computation, something that may be partially explained by the early English language training component in the immersion program.

An often stated goal for bilingual education is reduced dropout rates. A time series design was used in a second study (Gersten, Carnine, and Keating, 1984), comparing students who began Follow Through in 1968 and 1969 to similar students in Uvalde who began 1st grade in 1966 and 1967, prior to the implementation of the

Follow Through program. Analysis of the high school data shows that direct instruction students (1) are more likely to receive a high school diploma; (2) are less likely to be retained in any grade; and (3) show better attendance in the 9th grade. Prior to Follow Through, only 40 percent of the students successfully graduated from high school. With the immersion program, the graduation rate was 53 percent. The retention rate was reduced from 44 to 21 percent.

The Pacific City Project

The Pacific City¹ program has been in operation since 1969 in one elementary school. It was developed by Mary Alice Brockway and Nancy Henares. Essentially, the instructional model and philosophy are similar to Uvalde's although the program's evaluation was a bit different. Also, the project was developed by two teachers without external support.

The student population in 1969 consisted of highly mobile, low-income blacks, with a few English-speaking Asians. Because many students had academic problems, teachers introduced a direct instruction program using the Distar materials and teaching procedures articulated by Rosenshine (1983) and others.

In 1970, four limited-English-speaking 1st graders entered the program. Since there was no formal bilingual program, these children were taught using the direct instruction program in language and reading. Because the program was successful, all new language minority students in the primary grades were soon included in it.

During the mid-1970s, the few Asian students in the intermediate grades were not taught English language reading for their first five-eight months of school. In the meantime, their younger siblings in the primary grades were being taught in direct instruction reading and language from the first day of school. By the end of the year, the primary grade students were reading in English and beginning to speak with some fluency, often surpassing their older siblings in English language and reading skills. Parents exerted pressure for these older students to be included in the program. Beginning in 1979, an ungraded model was developed for K-6 limited-English-speaking Asian students. (Ko-

rean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Thai, Filipino, and Samoan).

Evaluation of the Pacific City Project

The Pacific City evaluation included a comparison group of limited-English-proficient Asian students at other schools using a transitional bilingual model. At the beginning of 1st grade, the groups were equivalent on the Language Assessment Scales, a test of English language proficiency. After two years in the program, 75 percent of the immersion students had reading scores at or above grade level, whereas only 19 percent of the transitional students were at that level. In language, the proportions were 71 percent for immersion versus 44 percent for transitional; in math, 96 percent versus 62 percent.

Two years after these students left the program and entered regular classrooms, the mean reading score was the 65th percentile, language the 67th, and math the 65th—all above national norms. (For more details on the evaluation see Gersten, in press.)

Ironically, the reason the Pacific City program was able to exist during these years was because the non-English-speaking population was so small; there were never enough language minority students at a given grade level to require the Lau Remedies. As the number of Asian students increases, the district may terminate the program despite consistently positive results and parent support.

Discussion

Despite the large number of research articles and papers documenting and analyzing the effectiveness of direct instruction in the national Follow Through Program (Becker, 1977; Becker and Gersten, 1982; House and others, 1978; Kennedy, 1978; Stallings, 1975), the thrust of each essay has been the overall effectiveness of the program for low-income students. None of these articles mentions that the Uvalde program was not only a direct instruction program but also a structured English immersion program.

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In Uvalde, teachers use direct instruction materials, but enhance them in a variety of ways. They translate difficult words into Spanish, provide practice in selected English language skills, and offer six weeks of special instruction to non-English speakers. Merely placing Distar or any curriculum package into classrooms will not make a difference; special training and adaptations are necessary.

The success of the Uvalde and Pacific City programs—and a somewhat similar immersion program in McAllen, Texas—leads us to question the assertions of many authorities in bilingual education. Despite claims that immersion can't work in the U.S., or that immersion can't work with low-income students, these results indicate that immersion can and does work with low-income Hispanic and Asian children and that the effects seem to endure even after students enter the mainstream.

The case against structured immersion for language minority children often implies that this approach would be damaging to these children. “Their

personal identities, their early conceptual development, their chances of competing or succeeding would all be hampered by an immersion-in-English program” (Lambert, 1984, cited in Baker, 1984).

Structured immersion worked in Uvalde for specific reasons. The basic approach (direct instruction) has been proven successful with disadvantaged and low-performing students. The features of the approach are supported by the teacher effectiveness literature (Brophy and Good, 1984). The adaptation of the direct instruction program in Uvalde is compatible with Tikunoff's (1983) study of effective bilingual programs; that is, the home language was used to clarify instruction while the main teaching was done through immersion techniques.

What constitutes effective instruction for language minority students? Both structured immersion and transitional bilingual education are relatively easy to write about, yet difficult to implement sensitively on a day-to-day basis. We are just beginning to really understand these issues. Future research documenting exactly what happens in effective classrooms—which aspects of the curriculum are useful and which could be modified—is an essential next step. The research of David Ramirey and his colleagues should begin to shed some light on this issue. For now, structured immersion appears to be a viable alternative to transitional bilingual education, with empirical results to support its use. □

¹This is a pseudonym. The district asked not to be identified.

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Understanding Bilingual Education— or The Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

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The education of language-minority students must be approached with caution and objectivity; there is more than one answer to this issue.

I have several reasons for wanting to reply to Gersten and Woodward's article, not the least of which is that they quoted me directly and promised in the same breath to show the world that my remarks were totally without foundation.

A more unselfish reason for my interest, however, concerns the article's "potential to divide and disrupt a germinating field"—bilingual education (Willig, 1981-82, p. 7). It is one thing to attempt to prove and celebrate the fact that a program has been

effective in fulfilling the educational needs of linguistic minority children; it is quite another to suggest, by quoting from the AIR report (Danoff, 1978) and Baker and de Kanter (1984), that this program has succeeded for the very same reasons that bilingual education has failed. In addition, I am disturbed by Gersten and Woodward's apparent lack of understanding of the purpose of bilingual education and the nature of bilingual education programs (Willig, p. 1). If we in the field of bilingual education have not suc-

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