**By [THE EDITORS, New York Times](http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/author/the-editors/" \o "More Posts by The Editors)**

 MARCH 11, 2009 8:39 PM

Starting this weekend, The Times will publish a series of articles on the impact that the latest wave of immigrants is having on American institutions. [Education is the first theme](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/15/us/15immig.html), and in a [previous Room for Debate discussion](http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/11/the-best-ways-to-teach-young-newcomers/), experts shared their insights into what works best in teaching children who do not speak English. Here are excerpts of comments from readers, who shared their personal experiences and observations on the subject.

**The Sinkhole of Bilingual Education**

In the 1990’s I worked in a New York City public school with a large Hispanic bilingual population and program. It was an educational disaster. Many of the teachers were more “bi-illiterate” than they were bi-lingual. Some given N.Y.C. teaching licenses and working in classrooms were later found not to be college graduates.

Additionally, many of these students, aged 12 to 14, had had little formal education in their home countries, mainly the Dominican Republic and Mexico. They were essentially illiterate in Spanish, as were their parents. Their Spanish vocabulary was impoverished. Their grammar was faulty. Their pronunciation was badly inaccurate.

They would have been much better served to have been given total immersion in English. They weren’t. School was not part of their family culture. No amount of teacher dedication could possibly overcome the profound lack of sustained commitment to learning that pervaded their extra-school lives.

Those who did succeed had family support. Their families supported the teachers in a quest for discipline, completion of homework and regular class attendance. Sadly, far too many families paid only lip service to the idea of education, and did not commit themselves to seeing to it that their children studied. It is not necessary to know all the answers to your child’s assignments to know when your child has lied to you about completing those assignments.

This same school also had a smaller population of students from China and Poland. These students were placed in E.S.L. classes and made rapid progress in English and the mastery of all school subjects. They passed the entrance exams to schools such as Brooklyn Tech.

As for the bilingual educational establishment, I came to see it as a sinkhole for money, with a parallel structure of administrators mainly concerned with increasing their community power through job patronage and bloated budgets that did nothing for the children in the classroom. Those people who ought to have been the strongest advocates for children used their positions to undermine any possibility for the educational success of those children.

*— M.E. Hansen*

**‘English as a Second Language’ Helps**

I remember when I first came to the US in 5th grade and I was put into a regular classroom with the rest of the students and I didn’t know what was going on. When I reached 7th grade the district started the English as a Second Language program. Although I knew English relatively well by that time, this program helped me perfect it more and learn about phrases and customs that people in the U.S. have. In eighth grade I was even asked by a teacher to write for the school newspaper and I wrote better than my peers in my regular and honors classes.

My point is that I don’t think every subject should be taught bilingually in schools, but students should get the extra help that E.S.L. provided me in order to improve performance. It didn’t make me feel “special” or “foreign” and it helped a lot.

*— Edgar*

**A Victim in Kindergarten**

I met a 6-year-old boy with passable English skills in Alaska one summer. His parents were Hispanic and worked in the cannery that my husband managed. I was homeschooling my own kids that year. The 6-year-old showed up at my door everyday when I was about to start school — so, of course, I taught him too. Good thing. He had just completed kindergarten in Klamath Falls, Oregon, where he had learned the alphabet — in Spanish.

Think about it. Kindergarten. Why would anyone teach a 5-year-old the alphabet in Spanish? I can understand a dual-language or immersion program for older kids — but kindergarten? Someone was not thinking clearly — or if they were, their foremost consideration was not the best interests of the kids. By the end of the summer, he knew the alphabet in English and was prepared to learn to read in English that fall.

My own kids are now college-bound honors students. I still think about that little boy I met that summer. He was every bit as bright and eager to learn as my kids. I hold out hope that he has been able to realize his potential — but knowing he is being educated in a school system that actively disadvantages kindergartners by teaching them in the wrong language gives me pause.

*— Teri*

**Why Be Monolingual?**

I teach bilingual math in a large urban school in New Mexico. I agree that all students should learn English. I also think that, if possible, we should be teaching academic skills in the students’ first language. In this country we have a tradition of students taking foreign language courses and emerging from those courses only knowing English.

With students who are English-language learners, we have the opportunity to teach them both languages. All my students want to learn English and they do, to varying degrees. They also learn academic Spanish to varying degrees. Are monolingual people often afraid of students becoming bilingual? Or do they think it to be impossible because they themselves are not bilingual?

*— John T.*

**Don’t Segregate**

My parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico with four of us in tow. I entered the school system, at the sixth grade. As expected the first months were confusing. I attended regular class sessions with the rest of the students, except for a period during the day, dedicated to English as a Second Language study.

Along with several other immigrant children, I was taught pronunciation, some vocabulary, and allowed to explore the language from a personal perspective. We could read, “Dick and Jane” books, use pronunciation cards, or engage the instructor in Q&A sessions. By the end of the program we had the basic skills to begin understand English at a rudimentary level, increasing our participation in regular class sessions.

At home, we watched television with increasing sense of awareness. During the summer we attended summer school, and participated in bilingual art programs. The second year was more challenging. The ESL program was gone, except for a bilingual home-room period. Now we had to do it on our own. It was a bit tougher, but we managed.

By the third year, I understood enough to be a straight “A” student. Since then, I’ve watched with fascination the different ESL programs. In my opinion, the worst thing you can do is to segregate children. As children, we learn during play time, as well as during class time. We form friendships, based on our curiosity to explore our differences, which promote our understanding of the language as well as the local culture.

*— Jose*

**Ethnic Separatism Causes Strife**

I think there are two issues here. One is what is good for the student who is not proficient in English and the other is what is good for America and the American society as a whole. I immigrated 15 years ago to America with a hope of building a better future for myself and my kids. I had a 3-year-old child then.

I came from a place where there are more than 10 languages that are spoken for a population of 15 million. My native language was different from the national language which was used for all instructions in education and official work. I always felt disadvantaged because of that situation. So when it was time for my kids to go to school I remembered my own situation and decided that they will stick to the official language here in the U.S.

We started talking to them in English at home also. Now I feel they are as proficient in English as anyone else in this country. We do miss them not speaking our native language but we made a decision when we migrated. We knew we could not have both. We cannot try to be what we were back home. We sacrifice certain things to gain others. In a similar fashion it is for all parents of migrants to decide for themselves what they want for their children. If they want the best for their children, they have to let them be “American” which starts with learning English. There is a lot of resistance in some migrants to learning English. This will only disadvantage their own children.

The second issue is the social strife that comes with different ethnic groups identifying as belonging to that group and not to the nation as a whole. We have seen that in many countries around the world including in Europe. The only way to prevent this is to prevent polarization in the society. Language is probably one of the most polarizing issues. America needs to have everyone speak one language.

*— ssuraj*

**Don’t Give Too Many Options**

I am a first generation immigrant who came to the U.S. from Taiwan when I was 2. I am fortunate as to not have had the option to learn in two languages, as this would have undoubtedly prevented me from reaching my achievements, which include scoring a perfect score on the SAT’s, attending an Ivy League university, and starting my own businesses. It is ironic, that in the name of diversity, we inadvertently put some of those who are the most disadvantaged in our society at an even deeper disadvantage. Sometimes, giving children too many options hurts them more than it helps them.

*— Ed Chen*

**The Problem Is Cultural**

My father is an immigrant from Mexico, and my mother is fourth-generation Mexican-American from California/Arizona. As such I’ve been able to see the development of my first-generation cousins, aunts and uncles on my father’s side as well as the development of my family on my mothers side.

You can’t just throw money and teachers at this problem because it goes deeper than teachers and programs. The fact of the matter is that the problem is cultural in regard to Mexicans.

Historically Mexico’s population was centered around agriculture. In the small farming towns and villages education takes second place to helping out on the family farm.

This attitude carries over to the States.

Solving the problem starts with the parents and communities. Some of these parents may not even have the education that their children have so they cannot help with homework or they are so accustomed to living in a particular way they don’t strive for more. Meaning that the parents don’t put an impetus on their children to truly excel academically. More often than not children aim low, they grow accustomed to just floating by, because they don’t expect more from themselves and neither do their families.

Full immersion works best. As my father would say about my cousins who were getting bilingual education, “Well, I speak to them in English and it sounds bad, so I speak to them in Spanish and it’s just as bad.”

*— Adrian*

**My Bilingual Class Was a Blessing**

As a 7-year-old child, who moved to New York from Puerto Rico, I spent several months in a bilingual classroom. I am now an adult who can speak four languages, and consider English to be my mother tongue. Getting my initial bearings in a bilingual environment has turned out to be a true blessing. Expecting children to run before they can walk is unrealistic and irresponsible.

*— apons*

**Society Pays a Price**

I taught in two school districts in Southern California for 13 years. The student population at the schools I taught at in both districts was predominately Hispanic, over 95 percent.

I noticed a direct correlation between student success and the early acquisition of English language skills. Not only were students more likely to succeed academically, but they were less likely to engage in inappropriate classroom behavior and to have other discipline issues in school.

In my opinion, bilingual education at the primary grades is extremely harmful. K-3 is a time when children acquire and develop the essential skills they need to read, write, interpret, analyze and communicate information for their entire academic life. If they leave the primary grades with a deficit, then they fall into the vicious cycle of trying to play catch-up year after year, with most falling further and further behind.

The overall costs of bilingual education are enormous, and I’m not just talking about the cost to educate a child. There are a host of issues that surround LEP (Limited English Proficient) students that are costly to society as a whole. For example, many of them have parents who do not speak English. Thus, the child is expected to learn and speak English during the school day and then goes home and does not practice those skills. Needless to say, not only are the language skills not reinforced, but the child often feels disconnected from both his native culture and the American culture, making assimilation extremely difficult.

The grading system for English Language Learners and LEP students is inconsistent, inaccurate and not aligned with the state standards. Teachers who grade according to state standards are penalized and given poor performance reviews, yet state law and district standards insist that only grade level material and grade level standards are taught in classrooms.

I taught a CAHSEE (California High School Exit Exam) at a school for two years. I had students in grades 11-12 who had failed the exam and would not graduate if they did not pass regardless of the number of credits they earned. The exam is based on the 7th grade language arts standards.

I had an 11th grade student who I just adored come to me wanting to know why he was getting a D in my class. He said he had always earned at least a B in all his English classes. When I explained to him that he just wasn’t doing well on the material assigned which was based on the exam that was based on the 7th grade language arts standards, he was surprised to learn he was that far behind. I have no idea how he was graded between grades 7 and 11, but it certainly wasn’t based on the standards. The good news is that student visited me the following year at another school I was teaching at in the district; he did pass the exam and receive his high school diploma. He came to tell me thank you.

*— Nancy Flippin*