Top of Form

# The Best Ways to Teach Young Newcomers

Here in Room for Debate, experts in the education of children learning English are already discussing [strategies](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/expert/glossary.html) that schools around the country are adopting to help these students meet rising academic standards.

**No Child Left Behind: Pros and Cons**

***Robert Linquanti****is project director at*[*WestEd*](http://www.wested.org/cs/we/print/docs/we/home.htm)*, a regional educational research agency based in San Francisco. (The views expressed here are his own, and not necessarily those of his agency or its funders.)*

Educators are using many different strategies to help students who arrive at school knowing little or no English. These five million “English-language learners” are the fastest-growing population in our public schools, and more than half of them are actually U.S.-born, the children of immigrants.

Schools in various states are setting language and academic goals, developing students’ academic language skills, using “scaffolded” instruction so students at different language levels are actively engaged in academic work and building on students’ first-language abilities, to name a few approaches.

But regardless of the strategy, they are all happening within the context of the federal [No Child Left Behind](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/n/no_child_left_behind_act/index.html) law (plus state laws that may dictate instructional practices).

The federal law has generated some benefits for English learners by shining a spotlight on these students, and making their performance count. Most states now have standards for children learning English as a second language, annual assessments based on those standards and targets to ensure more students are progressing and reaching English language proficiency over time. That’s good news.

But the law is seriously flawed in not properly valuing English learners’ academic progress when calculating a school’s performance over time. Worse, the law requires that by 2014 all of these students should walk through the school door meeting state academic standards, regardless of their English proficiency or how long they’ve been in school.

Such provisions have made it harder for many teachers and principals to carry out effective practices for their schools and undermined the law’s credibility and support. Also, because of gross underfunding, the No Child Left Behind law hasn’t provided much needed training and support to help teachers deliver high-quality instruction to these children.

The law is flawed but it does shine a spotlight on English learners and makes their performance count.

There has been a long and acrimonious debate on the use of bilingual instruction to educate these students since it links to such lightning-rod issues as immigration policy, national identity and multiculturalism. That aside, the most rigorous research demonstrates that instructing these students bilingually, particularly in the earlier grades, is modestly beneficial in their acquiring literacy in English (about as much an effect as phonics instruction — with the added cognitive and academic benefits of bilingualism and biliteracy).

It’s a strategy that educators should be free to employ when there is a sufficient minority-language group, demonstrated teacher expertise and materials to deliver quality bilingual instruction and sustained community support for its goals. Yet several states have enacted laws or carried out the requirements of the No Child Left Behind law in ways that discourage or curtail the use of bilingual instructional methods. That lack of flexibility hinders, rather than helps, our immigrant students’ success.

**For Bilingual Education, You Need Bilingual Teachers**

***Roger Prosise****is superintendent of the*[*Diamond Lake School District*](http://www.d76.lake.k12.il.us/)*in suburban Chicago.*

In the fall of 2007, Diamond Lake School District 76 received three letters from the Illinois State Board of Education.

The first two letters congratulated the schools for excellent results on state tests over a three-year period. English-language learners were performing exceptionally well.

The third letter was a notification that the state would no longer give the district the grant ($170,000) for English-language learners because the district was out of compliance with the state’s mandated bilingual education policy.

I’m in my 11th year as the superintendent of the district, which has 1,300 elementary school students. Half of them are Latino, and 40 percent are low-income. During my first five years we tried bilingual education. During this time, the bilingual teachers (who were and are Latina) came to me and said that the bilingual program wasn’t working in our district. Their observations were backed up by the results on standardized assessments. The teachers were not satisfied with student progress and were concerned that there weren’t enough quality bilingual teachers to staff the program in later grades.

The bilingual program didn’t work in my district because of the shortage of bilingual education teachers, who, in addition to being fluent in both languages, must get a bilingual endorsement from the state.

The state board of education praised our test results, but found us out of compliance with bilingual education mandates.

District 76 even went to Spain to recruit bilingual teachers. This too didn’t work. (Any first year teacher needs a lot of help to succeed, and the teachers from Spain, while bilingual, also needed a great amount of support to adjust to American schools and culture.) The bilingual programs were not staffed at the same high standard as the regular English-speaking classroom.

I met with the bilingual teachers and we changed the program to meet the needs of English language learners in my district. We decided to teach in English and provide support in Spanish — an alternative research-based program called [“sheltered English.”](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/expert/glossary.html)

The teachers planned the lesson in English, taught it in English. When the teacher saw that she needed to talk in Spanish, she did. The amount of talking and teaching in Spanish was greater in the first 2 or 3 weeks, then tapered off. Children struggling in reading were given an additional 30 minutes daily of reading instruction in English by a reading teacher. The change worked. The children in our program are successful. In addition to greatly improved test scores, the district received a 95 percent approval rating from parents in an anonymous parent survey, conducted in English and Spanish.

I am not saying bilingual education doesn’t work. There are plenty of examples of bilingual education that have been successful. I am simply advocating for choice. Bilingual education should be optional, not mandatory. The local district should decide.

Fortunately, through a wide network of supporters, Diamond Lake School District 76 prevailed and the district received its grant for English-language learners from the state of Illinois.

**Teach in Two Languages**

***Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and***[***Carola Suárez-Orozco***](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/faculty_bios/view/Carola_Suarez-Orozco)*are the co-directors of*[*the immigration studies program at New York University*](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/immigration/)*and the co-authors of*[*“Children of Immigration”*](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/SUACHI.html)*and*[*“Learning A New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society.”*](http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/SUAMOV.html)

Immigrant children are the fastest-growing sector of the student population — 22 percent and climbing. Unfortunately, American schools are unprepared to meet the historic challenge of educating these children. Federal policies over the last decade have made the task even more problematic.

Fully developing *academic* English skills (not just colloquial) takes longer (five to seven years under optimal conditions) than impatient policy makers allow. Students with limited literacy in their native language need even longer to solidify their academic skills in a new language. As a result, simply throwing an English-language learner into a full immersion program doesn’t work. A better bet is providing high-quality intensive English lessons while teaching math, science and social studies in the students’ native tongues, thus helping newcomers work at grade level while they master the new language.

The best results come from [dual-immersion](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/expert/glossary.html) classes, in which students learn half the time in English and half in their native language, usually Spanish, with half the class being native English speakers and the others native Spanish speakers. Strong programs also provide language tutoring, homework help and writing assistance as newcomers move into mainstream classes.

The best way for English-language learners to succeed — and not become a burden on society — is to place them in programs that identify their incoming literacy and academic skills and provide them with consistent English instruction and annual assessments to measure progress and make adjustments, if necessary. The key to success with a program like this is transitional academic support, including tutoring, ongoing language instruction, homework help and writing assistance. The [Internationals Network for Public Schools](http://www.internationalsnps.org/) in New York are an excellent example of what can be done to engage new arrivals.

The current high-stakes testing accountability system creates unintended consequences for immigrant English-language learners that outweigh whatever benefits standardized tests may have.

The current high-stakes testing accountability system creates unintended consequences for immigrant English-language learners that outweigh whatever benefits standardized tests may have. Because too many immigrant students attend segregated, impoverished schools and typically change schools and programs often, their performance on these tests is further compromised. Indeed, many of them are tested well before they have adequately developed academic language skills.

What’s more, immigrant students from low-income families do not typically have the academic supports at home that middle-class students have: educated parents who can help them on their essays, a computer with Internet access, a quiet place to do homework. A school committed to seeing its English-language learners succeed should provide after-school programs that offer homework help, language tutoring and college counseling.

Here we have much to learn from our neighbors to the North. The Toronto District School Board is doing marvelous work in providing “wrap-around services” — including nutrition, homework, after-school programs and family outreach to newly arrived immigrant students.

A century ago, uneducated immigrant children could start on the factory floor and rise to the middle class, but that path for mobility no longer exists. If we fail to teach today’s newcomers the skills they need to prosper in a global economy, we condemn them to a life of poverty and alienation from the mainstream society.

**No, Teach in English**

***Linda Mikels****is the principal of*[*Sixth Street Prep School*](http://www.vesd.net/schools/sixth-street-prep/)*, a charter elementary school in Victorville, Calif.*

Although we have been confronted with the challenge of teaching non-English speaking children since the early years of public education, educators continue to debate both the pedagogy and the system for educating them. We have seen the pendulum swing [from bilingual instruction, to full immersion, to dual immersion](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/expert/glossary.html)and everything in between. States have also taken up the gauntlet, defining what English-language development should look like and certifying teachers to provide this instruction.

At Sixth Street Prep we have demonstrated that English-language learners can achieve at proficient levels within full-immersion model, or a classroom where only English is spoken. Over the past eight years, our English-language learners have improved on the state test in language arts, from 7 percent proficiency to 62 percent proficiency, and in math, from 19 percent proficiency to 88 percent proficiency.

By following the research of [Larry Lezotte](http://www.effectiveschools.com/), author of “Learning for All, Whatever it Takes,” [Robert Marzano](http://www.marzanoresearch.com/site/), author of “Classroom Instruction that Works,” and others, our school has implemented effective instruction practices and adopted a belief system that should be a model for not just elementary education but for high school as well. The secret lies in focusing on learning instead of teaching. When a teacher is focused on teaching, you will hear, “I taught it; they just didn’t learn it.” By contrast, a teacher who is focused on the learning is constantly checking for understanding and modifying their instruction to enable all students to learn.

I think what makes our school unique — but certainly one that others could emulate — is that our teachers believe that all children can learn and achieve high standards in spite of barriers like poverty, language and ethnicity.

We also have a pedagogy that more closely resembles coaching than it does lecturing. Instruction is rich in academic English with extensive interaction among students and among teachers and students. This coaching model provides constant monitoring and timely feedback to students. It does not rely on “pull-out programs” or “ability grouping” to meet student needs. Rather, the teacher differentiates instruction in a way that ALL students, including the non-English-speaking students, have the opportunity to learn. The truth is that good instruction for an English-language learner is good instruction for all students.

Within this model, struggling students are supported with one-on-one coaching, peer tutoring and small group support right within the classroom. While these students are being instructed at grade level, the teacher provides the individual support that each student needs.

At Sixth Street [we do not assign homework](http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/20/EDGNNQ50DI1.DTL&hw=homework&sn=006&sc=1000). Research shows that homework does not increase student achievement at the elementary level. Since many of our parents do not speak English and have had only limited schooling, we believe that assigning homework is an issue of equity. If students require additional practice to master a standard, they should have the opportunity to practice it under the watchful eye of the classroom coach who can provide feedback and reteaching immediately when it is needed.

Assigning homework to students whose parents don’t speak English is unfair.

We believe strongly that all students should be taught the grade level standards while they are learning English. In our current system of accountability under No Child Left Behind, all students, including English-language learners, must demonstrate proficiency in the state standards. In California, these students must take the state assessment within 12 months of beginning in the school system. Moreover, these students cannot be reclassified until proficiency in the state standards is demonstrated. When students are placed in “pull-out programs” they are being denied the essential classroom instruction in the standards that they require.

The same is true when they are grouped by ability for instruction. In these settings, teachers focus on “gaps” in a student’s learning and often neglect instruction in the essential standards. It is morally wrong to deny any student instruction in the standards, especially vocabulary, syntax, grammar and usage instruction.

As a nation, we have to stop wringing our hands in despair as if non-English-language fluency equates to ignorance. The only ignorance I see is on the part of those who behave as if non-English fluency is a handicap. At our school, even students who arrive with no English can achieve proficiency in math in a year and in language arts in two years. And it all has to do with our belief system.

**Personalize the Plan**

***Ricardo Leblanc-Esparza****, a teacher and a principal for 25 years, works for the*[*Center for Secondary School Redesign*](http://www.cssr.us/index.htm)*in the Philadelphia School District.*

Unfortunately, the education of non-English speaking children has not improved in the last 10 or 20 years. Sure, there are some programs that work but, by and large, academic achievement results point to a gap between non-English-speaking and English-speaking children that has only grown larger.

In my experience, dual-language instruction — where students are taught in their native language and then in English — shows the most promise. Of course, this is mostly feasible in areas of the country where you are only dealing with one other language like Spanish. It would be a very difficult form of instruction to implement in a district that serves more than 50 languages because it’s hard finding instructors proficient in all of those languages.

What doesn’t work in educating non-English speakers is “pull out” hourlong classes of English-language instruction. Simply put, pull-out classes do not provide enough time for students to develop the necessary skills to function in all their classes for the rest of the day.

Ignoring the child’s native language is a big mistake, especially if that’s the language the student speaks at home.

Furthermore, ignoring a child’s native language is a big mistake, especially if that’s the language the student speaks at home. If English is attached to that verbal and written knowledge then the student will be more likely to experience success and actually gain more self-esteem.

When I was the principal from 1999 until last year of [Granger High School](http://www.gsd.wednet.edu/) — a school in Washington State in which the majority were English-language learners from low-income households (78 percent were first-generation high school graduates) — I worked with the teachers to develop a personalized education plan for all 400 students. The plans focused on each student’s current academic skills in reading, writing and math and on their career goals. All students, and especially students from low-income households, need individual support to navigate the educational system and provide guidance.

As part of the plan, we invited parents to a conference twice a year that was led by the student with a teacher acting as an adviser and a facilitator in the meeting. The teacher served as a mentor who helped make sure both the student and their parents understood how our school system operated.

This formula coupled with reading intervention helped our school move to a 90 percent graduation rate from below 50 percent over a six-year period. And our school’s reading scores improved to 77 percent from 20 percent over a seven year period of time.

**Emphasis on English Has Paid Off**

***Linda Chavez****is the*[*chairman of the Center for Equal Opportunity*](http://www.ceousa.org/content/view/506/122/)*and the author of “Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation.”*

More than five million children in the United States enter school speaking a language other than English — they represent a majority of students in many urban school districts. This population has grown rapidly over the last 30 years, especially among Spanish speakers who make up nearly 80 percent of this group and whose size has doubled in the last dozen years.

For decades, the debate on how best to teach such children centered on whether and for how long they should receive instruction in their native language. But bilingual education — the method preferred by many academic researchers and the powerful bilingual teachers lobby — did little to improve the academic performance of non-English speakers during this period and instead sparked a culture war in many school districts.

Two pivotal events helped turn the tide. In 1998, voters in California overwhelmingly approved Proposition 227, a ballot initiative that directed state school officials to provide intensive English instruction, in place of bilingual education, to non-English speakers.

In 2001, the federal No Child Left Behind law required that states test all English-language learners annually to assess their English proficiency and include them in all state assessments in math, reading and English language arts. The legislation also required that after three consecutive years of enrollment, English-language learners must take reading and English language arts tests in English rather than in their native language as some states had previously allowed indefinitely. The result was a new nationwide emphasis on English acquisition.

With the replacement of bilingual education, students are making significant academic strides.

With this new emphasis on English — not preserving native language and culture as it had been in the heyday of bilingual education — immigrant children are finally making significant academic strides. Not surprisingly, now that much of their instruction is in English, they are learning English more quickly.

They are also improving their performance in other subject areas. In Maryland, for example, 65 percent of English learners passed statewide reading tests in 2008, up from only 18 percent in 2003. In Virginia, 78 percent of English learners passed the state reading tests, up from 55 percent in 2003. In New York City, nearly 57 percent of English learners scored proficient in math in 2008, from less than 17 percent in 2003.

English-language learners still face enormous challenges. Many of these children come from poor families and their parents often lack formal education. The economic crisis will encourage more of these students, who already have high dropout rates, to leave school to help provide financial help to their parents and siblings. But the trend toward earlier English acquisition is nonetheless an important harbinger of future economic success for second- and third-generation Americans.

**Native-Born, but Not Native Speakers**

***[Delia Pompa](http://www.nclr.org/section/audience/media/media_guide/delia_pompa)****is vice president for Education at the*[*National Council of La Raza*](http://www.nclr.org/)*. She began her career as a kindergarten teacher in San Antonio, Tex.*

A popular myth about students who are English-language learners is that they are all immigrants. The truth is that 65 percent of them are United States-born children of immigrants, or second generation, and 17 percent are children of United States-born parents, or third generation. These are American children who must be served well by the public schools, particularly during this critical economic period in our country.

The last 20 years have seen drastic changes for English-language learners in America. Not only have we developed more effective strategies for teaching academic English skills, we have committed ourselves to ensuring that English-language learners are held to the same standards as all students.

Not all students learning English arrived in the United States yesterday; some were born here and have been here for generations.

The changes have resulted in more teachers using better strategies like helping students build stronger vocabularies through literature and teaching language in the context of learning history, math and other important subjects. Policymakers and administrators are tracking the progress and results for all students, including English-language learners, and moving to close achievement gaps.

Still, we have a long way to go. But using a child’s native language while English language skills are developed or figuring out ways that parents can understand what their children know and need to know are decisions that should be left up to educators.

What doesn’t work is politicizing the issue. What occurs in the classroom should be determined by educators guided by what is good for all children; it shouldn’t be driven by debates on immigration. What doesn’t work is misinformation about English-language learners. They are not all immigrants who arrived in the United States yesterday and at the schoolhouse door today. These are American children. And what has no chance at all of working is avoiding responsibility for educating these children.