

Challenges and Solutions in Meeting the Learning Instructional Needs of English Language Learners

Jerry E. Garrett
Marshall University Graduate College

The Problem

One of the greatest challenges facing schools today is meeting the needs of immigrant students. The population of immigrant children and youth entering schools throughout the United States, has increased dramatically over the past ten years. In 1999 there were approximately 6 million school-aged English Language Learners (ELLs) attending rural and urban schools across the country (Garrett, 2005). The number has more than doubled since that time, with over 14 million attending schools throughout the nation today (Reutzel & Cooter, 2008). Recent projections by the U.S. Census Bureau (2008) reveal that the nation will become even more racially and ethnically diverse by mid-century. The Hispanic population is expected to climb to over 132.8 million during the period 2008-2050; making approximately one in three U.S. residents Hispanic. The Asian population is expected to climb from 15.5 million to 40.6 million during the same time period. A large portion of the students coming from these groups will be limited in English.

One of the greatest concerns facing educators today toward the rapidly growing immigrant population in our schools, centers on the adequacy of teacher preparation and training. Researchers are finding that because there are so many different languages represented in American schools today, it has become impossible for bilingual teachers to speak so many different languages (Levin & McCullough, 2008). It has been asserted that, with beginning learners of English, it is better for any formal instruction in reading to be delayed until they have attained a reasonable grasp of the language (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). There is significant pressure for teachers to prepare ELLs to achieve higher levels academically and to meet standards just like any other American students. Bilingual programs reach only a small percentage of English language learners (Banks 2001; Diaz 2001; Garrett 2002; Vacca & Vacca 2008).

Background

To be in compliance with the Civil Rights Act and its clarification by the U.S. Supreme Court (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974), school districts across the nation must legally provide educational services to students, who are limited in the English language. Under the law each school district must “take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional programs” (Unrau, 2008). The law does not specify that instruction must be provided in the student’s native language. There is no specification of methods that must be employed in teaching them. “Appropriate action” is stipulated by an additional federal court decision. This includes use of sound theory, providing adequate support, and achieving results (*Casteneda v. Pickard*, 5th cir. 1981).

The likelihood of teachers having at least some ELLs in their classrooms, at some point in time, is good. Teachers must be proactive in responding to the academic need of these students (Levin & McCullough, 2008). Teachers need to be more accepting of the cultural background of each individual student. The education ELLs receive may be impacted by the concept that teachers hold of the culturally diverse (Garrett, 2005). Research has revealed that the view of teachers toward education, as well as toward their students, has a direct impact on student performance and achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Overview of Instructional Strategies in Place for English Language Learners

Educators, parents, and legislators are concerned about the time and resources needed to educate students who are limited in English. Some people advocate placing these students into all-English classes immediately. Others feel that these students need to have a strong understanding of their own native language and of English before transitioning into regular classes (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 2009). Several programs can be identified, which have been used to help English Language Learners to gain proficiency with the English language. Some of these programs have similar features and only subtle differences, making it hard to distinguish between them in some cases. Following are eight of the programs identified by Unrau, 2008, which have been utilized to address the needs of ELLs:

English as a second language. The focus of this program is on developing English language skills, such as grammar, vocabulary, and oral competency. Content area instruction is not emphasized. In ESL programs students are pulled out of their other regular education classes and are provided full-time intensive instruction in English (Mora, Wink, & Wink, 2001.)

Content-based ESL. English language skill development is not the primary emphasis with this approach. Content-based ESL merges English-as-a-second-language (ESL) education with subject matter teaching. Instructional resources, educational tasks, and classroom instruction in content areas constitutes the medium for language development (Crandall, 1992).

Sheltered English immersion programs. The goal of this program is to make content area instruction in English understandable to English Language Learners. The initiative seeks to help ELLs become proficient in English while simultaneously achieving in the content areas. The term “sheltered” means that students in these classes do not compete academically with native speakers of English since the class contains only English Language Learners. Although assistance in English is a component of instruction, it is not the main instructional focus. Instead content knowledge and skills drive the goals of instruction.\

Structured English immersion programs. This program consists of some development of the ELL’s native language skills; however, content area instruction is in English. The teacher is bilingual. Students may address their teacher in either English or their native language. Teachers have a tendency to emphasize and respond in English, since they know that English limited students must become proficient in the language. Content area instruction is based on the theory of “comprehensible input,” where the teacher uses only vocabulary and language structure that is understandable by students (Ramirez, 1986).

Transitional bilingual education program. This program is based on the theory that children acquire fluency in any given second language by first becoming fluent in their own native language. Transitional bilingual education (TBE) strives to transition a student into an English-only classroom as quickly as possible. Children receive instruction from a bilingual teacher, in content area subjects, in their native language. Eventually when the transition is made to an English-only classroom, proponents of the TBE program believe that students will have the knowledge necessary to adequately participate with their peers in all subject areas. In the TBE program students are taught English while learning content area subjects in their native language. They remain in the TBE program for three years before transitioning to English-only classes (Gersten & Woodward, 1995).

Paired bilingual immersion program. The amount of English instruction for students in this program is increased as they gain proficiency in the language (Calderon & Minaya-Rowe, 2003). Research on the program revealed that students who received continued instruction in English as well as their native language, at different times of the day, made the most dramatic gains in reading performance when compared to English-only peers (Slavin & Cheung, 2005).

Two-way bilingual programs. Two-way bilingual programs are commonly referred to as “dual language” or “dual immersion” education programs. This aspect of the two-way approach is the same as the paired bilingual immersion program. The difference between the two programs is that in the two-way method, English proficient students are also taught in English and in a second language throughout the day. English Language Learners benefit from learning their native language as well as English. Native speakers of English gain an understanding of the difficulties the ELLs face, as a result of the native English speakers being exposed to a new language.

Maintenance bilingual education. A maintenance approach strives to maintain or enhance native language skills in students who are limited in English. Students are taught in their native language for a considerable time before transitioning to English. Advocates of the *maintenance* approach believe that a strong native-language component supports ensuing English and subject matter education, while maintaining a group's cultural heritage (Robledo & Cortez, 2002). It has been reported that immigrant students who are allowed to retain strong cultural and language affiliation are more likely to succeed academically and display more positive self-concepts (Banks, 2001; Diaz, 2001; Garrett, 2002; Vacca & Vacca, 2008). The focus of *maintenance* programs is on maintaining native-language competence and cultural heritage.

(See Table 1)

An Analogy of the Instructional Strategies

Slavin and Cheung, 2005, presented an analysis of the various instructional strategies described in this paper, in a professional research article entitled, "A Synthesis of Research on Language of Reading Instruction for English Language Learners." Of 17 studies they scrutinized, 12 revealed promising results of bilingual education in a child's academic functioning. 5 found no statistically significant differences, when conducting an analysis on gains in scores, between English immersion and bilingual education classes. None of the studies supported English immersion programs. Conclusions reached by Slavin and Cheung favor bilingual education in place of English immersion programs.

Technological Innovations Hold Promise for Communication with English Language Learners

The strategies that have been described in the aforementioned portion of this paper require time and patience before significant results can be seen. A common frustration voiced by learners and educators, about the initiatives mentioned, is that none of them offer an immediate cure. Schools in large metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Boston, Orlando, or Philadelphia offer assistance in an array of foreign languages. Smaller schools and those in rural areas are more limited financially; therefore, they seem to experience more difficulty in meeting the learning needs of the English limited. School personnel must find ways to enhance communications with English limited students and their parents in order to offer more quality instruction. With this need in mind, however, there is hope. Information technology has advanced to the point where it is now possible for individuals to instantly communicate around the globe, even if they do not speak a different language. Some of this technology appears promising, in terms of providing more appropriate learning experiences for English Language Learners.

Free Resources

The Internet may be a source of communication with ELLs. One resource, for example, is *Alta Vista Babelfish*, located online at <http://babelfish.yahoo.com/>. This tool, which is free of charge, can translate web pages or inputted text. When the website appears on a desktop the viewer sees a panel in the middle of the screen that is referred to as the "Babelfish Translator." There is an area where the viewer can input text by typing or by cutting and pasting what needs to be translated. Up to 150 words can be translated per entry. There is a pull down window for selecting the appropriate translation to be made. This includes translations from English to 12 different language possibilities, such as English to German, English to French, or English to Spanish. Messages can also be inputted in several different foreign languages, and translated to English. Various foreign languages can be entered and translated to other foreign languages if desired. For example, a message entered in German can be translated to Spanish, French, or a number of other foreign language choices. Additional free translator programs other than *Alta Vista Babelfish* can be found Online.

Translations Programs on CD

Universal Translator 2000 is a translation program that instantly translates documents, web pages, and E-mail and instant messages. Available on CD ROM, this translator program has a price tag of around \$110.00. Translations can be made in 25 languages including English (US, UK), French (CAN, EUR), German, Hungarian, Italian, Indonesian, Danish, Dutch, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese (BRZ, POR), Romanian, Russian, Spanish (LAM, EUR), Swedish, Tagalog, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian, and Zulu. More information may be obtained online at www.universaltranslator.net. A more advanced translation program

is under development by this company. Numerous translation programs on CD can be found by searching Online.

Talking Translator Tools

At www.pronto.com several talking language translator items are featured. One example is the ECTACO Partner EA800 - English - Arabic Talking Electronic Dictionary. This product is an expandable bilingual Dictionary and Travel Audio PhraseBook. The product is said to contain modern styling and a hi-resolution color touch-display. This item can be purchased for the price of \$399.00. There is an array of similar devices indicated at this website. Talking Translator Tools are popular with ELL's. Perhaps this explains why sales and availability of an array of Talking Translator Tools is skyrocketing, and can be discovered through an Online search.

Additional resources

Located at www.linguist.com/services-textbook-translation.htm, Linguistic Systems, Inc. (LSI) is one of several companies who offer an additional type of translation services. The firm provides textbook translations for K-12 textbook publishers. In recent times LSI has translated textbooks for middle school and high school math glossaries in 9 languages, American history in 12 languages, and a 1,500 page Spanish health textbook series. CTS Language Link, located at www.ctslanguage.com/translation_education.php, offers translation services for governmental agencies and local school districts. Translations are available for brochures, evaluations, handbooks, textbooks, multilingual websites, parent letters and notification forms, reports, assessments, texts, forms, applications, and transcripts. Typically companies of this nature charge by the word. Those using these resources are encouraged to shop a bit, as prices vary by company and by language. Some rare language translations can be expensive, charging .85 per word or more.

Conclusions

Recent research has revealed that different programs have been in existence, which has all had the goal of successfully educating students with limited English ability. All of the programs that have been implemented in our nation's schools have had strengths as well as shortcomings. No one program is able to claim absolute success in educating English Language Learners. The learners themselves apparently have the talent and potential to perform just as well as traditional American students if only their learning needs can be adequately treated. Several technological innovations have emerged over the past few years, which appear to hold merit for use as effective tools in educating those who are challenged by language barriers. Further research is recommended to better define the parameters and potential of some of the tools that have been invented for the purpose of communication enhancement between the English proficient and the English limited. More effective teaching strategies need to be identified, incorporating some of the new technologies identified in this paper, ultimately bringing about quality education for all learners, including the linguistically and culturally diverse.

Bibliography

- Banks, J. A. (2001). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching* [4th ed.]. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Calderon, M., & Minaya-Rowe, L. (2003). *Designing and implementing two-way bilingual programs*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Casteneda v. Pickard, 648 F.2D 989 (5th cir., 1981).
- Diaz, C. F. (2001). *Multicultural education for the twenty-first century*. New York: Longman.
- Garrett, J. E., & Holcomb, S. (2005). Meeting the needs of immigrant students with limited English ability. *International Education*, 35(1), 49-64.
- Garrett, J. (2002). Educating immigrant students: Administrator and teacher tips for responding to the crisis. *National Social Science Journal*, 19(1), 36-42.
- Gersten, R., & Woodward, J. (1995). A longitudinal study of transitional and immersion bilingual education programs in one district. *The Elementary School Journal*, 95(3), 223-239.

- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). What we can learn from multicultural education research. *Educational Leadership*, 5, 22-26.
- Lau v. Nichols, 414 US 563 (1974).
- Levin, F. A., & McCullough, M. A. (2008). *Guide for alternate route teachers: Strategies for literacy development, classroom management, and teaching and learning, K-12*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.
- Mora, J. K., Wink, J., & Wink, D. (2001). Dueling models of dual language instruction: A critical review of the literature and program implementation guide. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 25[4], 435-460.
- Ramirez, J. D. (1986). Comparing structured English immersion and bilingual education: First year results of a national study. *American Journal of Education*, 95, 122-149.
- Robledo, M. M. & Cortez, J. D. (2002). Successful bilingual education programs: Development and dissemination of criteria to identify promising and exemplary practices in bilingual education at the national level. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 26[1], 1-21.
- Reutzel, D. R., & Cooter, R. B., Jr. (2008). *Teaching children to read: The teacher makes the difference* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice-Hall.
- Slaven, R. E., & Cheung, A. (2005). A synthesis of research on language in reading instruction for English language learners. *Review of Educational Research*, 75[2], 247-284.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Snowman, J., McCown, R., & Biehler, R. (2009). *Psychology applied to teaching* (12th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Unrau, N. J. (2008). *Content area reading and writing: Fostering literacies in middle and high school cultures* (2nd ed.), Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). Retrieved January 1, 2006 from www.census.gov/popest/estimates.php
- U.S. Census Bureau (2008). Retrieved September 21, 2008 from www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html
- Vacca, R. T., & Vacca, J. L. (2008). *Content reading: Literacy and learning across the curriculum* (9th ed.). Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.
- Zehr, M. A. (2001). ESL students pose a special challenge for rural schools. *Education Week*, 20(41), 6.

Table 1

Highlights of Some of the Features of Programs for ELLs

Name of Program	Instruction in English	Instruction In English and In Native Language	Some Aspect of the Program Includes a Connection with Heritage and Learning Native Language	Instructional Focus is on English	Instructional Focus in on Content
------------------------	-------------------------------	--	--	--	--

ESL Only	X			X	
Content Based ESL	X			X	X
Sheltered English Instruction	X				X
Structured English Immersion		X			X
Transitional Bilingual Education	X	X		X	X
Paired Bilingual Program	X	X		X	
Two Way Bilingual Program	X	X		X	
Maintenance Bilingual			X	X	X