

ACCELERATING PROFICIENT ENGLISH LITERACY

Accelerating Proficient English Literacy Development

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This working paper explores contemporary research on the effectiveness of program models used in North America to assist English language learners (ELLs) to develop proficient English literacy. Implications will be drawn from the findings of this research and the paper will conclude with recommendations for practical application at the middle school level and for additional research.

Proficient English Literacy

In 2003 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL). “NAAL is a nationally representative assessment of English literacy among American adults age 16 and older” (National Assessment of Adult Literacy [NAAL], 2003b, paragraph one). English literacy was determined in terms of three categories: prose, document, and quantitative literacy. Each category was further divided into four skill levels: below basic, basic, intermediate, and proficient (NAAL, 2003a). There has been significant discussion in the research literature regarding the concept of academic language proficiency (Cummins, 2007b; Krashen & Brown, 2007). Because these program models are designed to assist ELLs to develop the English language proficiency necessary to be successful both in school and beyond school, the focus of this working paper is on the idea of accelerating the development of proficient levels of adult literacy (NAAL, 2003a) by the time the ELLs reach the age of 16—the minimum age for adults in the NAAL survey.

Program Models and Their Underlying Characteristics

Ruiz (1984—cited in Cummins, 2000, p. 171) identified three orientations to language that are tied to national goals (Roberts, 1995). Program models developed to assist ELLs to achieve English academic proficiency are connected to one of these three orientations to

language and to one of these national goals. Programs tied to the “assimilationist” goal and which view minority language as a problem focus on eliminating the minority language and are classified as “subtractive.” Programs connected to the pluralist goal and which view minority language as a right or as a resource work to establish proficiency in both L1 and L2 are classified as “additive.” These models are typed as either English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual (Roberts, 1995). See Table one.

Table 1—Program Models and Underlying Characteristics

Program Model	National Goal	Orientation to Language	Treatment of Native Language (L1)	Type
submersion	assimilationist	language as a problem	subtractive	ESL
ESL Pull-Out	assimilationist	language as a problem	subtractive	ESL
sheltered ESL or sheltered content				
transitional bilingual education	assimilationist	language as a problem	subtractive-minimalist support	bilingual
maintenance bilingual education	pluralist	language as a resource	additive	bilingual
immersion (Canadian model) English majority learning another L2	pluralist	language as a resource	additive	bilingual
language minority learning English L2	assimilationist	language as a problem	subtractive-minimalist support	bilingual
enrichment, two-way, dual, or developmental bilingual education	pluralist	language as a resource	additive	bilingual

(Adapted from Roberts, 1995; Mora, Wink & Wink, 2001; Rodriguez & Higgins, 2005)

Krashen (2006) reported a meta-analysis of relevant research studies of the results of bilingual education programs reported in the research literature. He defines meta-analysis as, “a precise method for reviewing research studies that allows reviewers to calculate the ‘effect size,’ or degree of superiority of one treatment over another” (p. 1).

Krashen’s research (2006) indicates that the reviews of the other studies indicate that bilingual education programs have a “modest advantage over English-only methods” (p. 1). “The ‘average’ student in the bilingual group scored about one quarter of a standard deviation higher than the ‘average’ of students in the all-English group” (p. 2). The actual effect size was 0.26. See Table two.

Table 2—Meta-Analytic Studies Reported in Krashen (2006)

Reviewers and Year	Number of Studies	Effect Size
Willig, 1985	23	0.33
Greene, 1997	11	0.18
McField, 2002	10	0.28
Rolstad et al., 2005	17	0.23
Slavin and Cheung, 2005	17	0.33

(Table adapted from Krashen & McField, 2005, cited in Krashen, 2006, p.2)

Krashen (2006) concludes from the data that bilingual education accelerates English language development. Going behind the quantitative data, Krashen reports that bilingual education provides instruction in the ELLs native language, enabling the acquisition of knowledge that can be transferred to English as the student builds proficiency in L2. In addition, good bilingual programs provide exposure to comprehensible English from the very first day. ELLs in bilingual education programs will be building literacy skills in both L1 and L2 and

growing their L2 content knowledge on a daily basis. This combination acts as a short-cut to English literacy.

The other researchers cited in this working paper also conclude that effective bilingual programs are more effective at assisting ELLs to develop English literacy skills (Cummins, 2000; de Jong, 2002; Montecel & Cortez, 2002; Mora, Wink & Wink, 2002; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 2002). Roberts, 1995 & Rodriguez & Higgins, 2005). A clear distinction is made between transitional bilingual education programs which provide minimal L1 support while encouraging development of L2 proficiency. This remains a subtractive approach to L1. In contrast, the maintenance bilingual education program is considered to be an additive approach because, at a minimum, it encourages ELLs to maintain their L1 or to increase it appropriately while building proficiency in L2. The most effective bilingual programs were called two-way, dual, enrichment, or developmental bilingual education. In these programs minority language students are mixed in classes with native-English speakers and both languages are used for instruction. At the end of the multi-year program (normally five to six at a minimum), all students will be both bilingual and biliterate. (Roberts, 1995).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This working paper explored contemporary research on the effectiveness of program models used in North America to assist English language learners (ELLs) to achieve proficient English literacy. Implications were drawn from the findings of this research and the paper now concludes with recommendations for practical application at the middle school level and for additional research. While the research was abbreviated, the bilingual education models connected to national goals of pluralism and to a language as resource orientation and an additive treatment of L1 are clearly the most effective for accelerating proficient English literacy

development at all levels of education. At a minimum, for school districts with resources insufficient to maintain a system-wide dual language initiative, maintenance bilingual education programs at least allow for the maintenance and limited growth of L1 while working on L2 proficiency. These are also additive programs and ELLs participating in maintenance bilingual education programs should be bilingual in both languages upon completion of the program. More research is needed, particularly in the areas of middle school English language development. The use of the NAAL definition for proficient adult literacy skills (NAAL, 2003a) may also be a useful standard against which to measure growth.

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