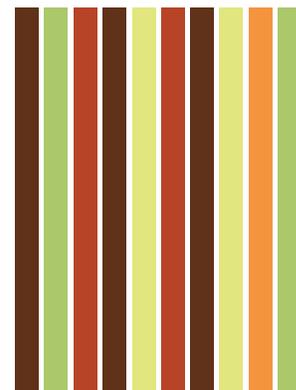


NEW JOURNALISM ON
LATINO
CHILDREN



Advancing the Language Skills of Young Latino Children

FRESH EVIDENCE: WHAT WORKS

More than 20% of U.S. children entering kindergarten today are of Latino heritage.¹ And Latino children – growing up in highly diverse communities – enter school with weaker math and English preliteracy skills than their non-Latino peers.² The growing percentage of Spanish-speaking children in today’s classrooms raises questions for educators, parents, and policymakers about how to best ensure these children acquire English and have a successful start in school. This brief reviews empirical research on the effects of quality preschool for Latino English learners; the efficacy of three instructional strategies for these children, including English immersion (EI), transitional bilingual education (TB), and dual language immersion (DL); and how facets of quality may enhance early learning.

Quality preschool advances the early cognitive, oral language, and preliteracy skills of many Latino children, especially those raised in low-income households or where Spanish is the dominant home language. Loeb and her Stanford-led team found that Latino kindergartners from low-income families who had attended a preschool center displayed significantly higher preliteracy skills, compared with similar children who did not attend.³ Larger preschool effects, yet still modest in



magnitude, have been noted among Latino 4-year-olds from Spanish-speaking homes, compared with Latino children from English-speaking homes.⁴ Given the general benefits of preschool, what is the most effective educational strategy for English-language learners (ELLs)? Do certain program models or features of quality raise the magnitude of preschool benefits?

New Journalism on Latino Children offers fresh viewpoints and evidence on Latino child development and schooling. The project is based at the Institute of Human Development at UC Berkeley, in collaboration with the Education Writers Association and the Latino Policy Forum, and funded by the McCormick Foundation. For additional stories and new research, go to: www.ewa.org.

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APPROACHES TO BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Bilingual education in the U.S. now includes three classroom strategies, each with the goal of helping children learn English. With **English immersion (EI)**, classroom lessons are taught exclusively in English, and it remains the only language spoken. In **transitional bilingual education (TB)**, teachers build from children's home language and transition them toward oral and written proficiency in English.

Finally, with **dual-language immersion (DL)**, classroom lessons and activities are carried out in time periods equally split between the child's home language and the second language, with the goal of oral and written proficiency in both English and, in this case, Spanish.

A respected review, conducted by Robert Slavin and Alan Cheung, including only the most carefully designed studies, compared EI classrooms to TB strategies, with most

studies including Spanish-dominant children.⁵ Overall, 12 of the 17 studies favored TB approaches, with the remaining five finding no significant difference between EI and TB classrooms. The advantage for children in TB programs, in terms of English proficiency, compared with those in EI classrooms, equaled 0.33 of a standard deviation (SD). This gain is similar to attending kindergarten for about three months, a consequential advantage. When the authors considered only the three random-assignment studies, the magnitude of the TB advantage rose to 0.62 SD. Slavin and Cheung concluded that despite wide variability in program quality, the evidence-to-date supports bilingual strategies rather than English immersion. In a later study, however, Slavin and colleagues found that children learned to read English equally well in both TB programs and EI programs, and suggested that the quality of the program may trump the strategy used.

Sound longitudinal research on DL programs is scarce, in part due to the more recent growth of this program model.⁶ One rigorous, longitudinal study, however, provides important evidence. Thomas and Collier followed about 210,000 English learners in elementary and secondary schools situated in five urban and rural areas of the nation.⁷ Over five years, they tracked children who were enrolled in one of the three program models and found that DL students scored above the standard at the end of fifth grade, while those in EI programs were behind the average English learner in fifth-grade by 0.75 SD. Those in TB programs reached the 34th percentile (TB with pull-out tutoring) to the 47th percentile (standard TB) at the end of fifth grade. While Thomas and Collier controlled on prior test scores and tracked growth curves, students were not randomly assigned to program treatments, and unobserved family background factors could have contributed to fifth-grade performance.

Research points to DL as a promising approach to teaching young English learners because it allows children to continue to build academic knowledge in their first language. In Europe, and many other parts of the world, it is standard practice to teach children a second (or third) language simultaneously, as they master their first.⁸ The mechanisms by which DL—or other bilingual education—strategies advance children's learning, however, are less clear. Recent studies do suggest several elements of preschool and early education quality that support a dual language approach.



THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

Dual-language strategies give children substantial amounts of home-language instruction, scaffolding new knowledge on to their existing language framework.⁹ Even so, recent studies suggest that teaching quality may be the most important aspect of the approach.¹⁰ Having teachers with high levels of oral language proficiency in Spanish and English, who are able to provide a rich language environment, is essential to building on children's existing language skills.¹¹ In addition, explicit instruction in phonological processing skills, particularly in phonological awareness, in Spanish and English, helps children build fluency in both languages.¹²

Finally, specific strategies that encourage parent involvement and provide support to Latino parents in creating engaging language and literacy experiences at home reinforce children's learning at preschool.¹³ Providing parents with appropriate books in Spanish that they can read to their children, ensuring school communications are available to parents in Spanish, and having activities at school that celebrate the Latino culture are solid approaches to creating stronger home-school relationships.

“In Europe...it is standard practice to teach children a second (or third) language...”

“[TB programs offer gains] similar to attending kindergarten for about three months.”

EFFECTIVELY ADVANCING LANGUAGE SKILLS

Young Latino English-language learners benefit from quality preschool, which boosts their language and literacy skills, and decreases achievement gaps between them and their non-Latino peers. As these preschool benefits have become clear, research has focused on ascertaining the most effective educational approach. While children in TB classrooms show gains in language and literacy, the DL approach appears to be particularly effective. This strategy builds on children's existing language knowledge by continuing to support their home language, and in this way, can encourage greater parental involvement to reinforce classroom learning at home. Teachers who use rich and complex language in English and Spanish, and emphasize phonological awareness, add to the effectiveness of the DL approach. By learning more about which bilingual approaches work best and for whom, quality preschool can better meet the needs of Latino English-language learners, getting them on track for educational success.



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New Journalism on Latino Children

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