

**Bilingual education vs. English immersion: Which is better for English  
Language Learners?**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine which model of instruction is better for English Language Learners (ELL), English immersion or bilingual education. Two research articles were selected, compared, and analyzed. One was for English immersion and the other for bilingual education. Results are inconclusive, but it is important for educators to focus more on the quality of instruction rather than the language of instruction.

## **Introduction**

Which is better for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students, English immersion or bilingual education? This debate has raged in educational circles for decades. Unfortunately, this discussion is not limited to academicians. It has been tainted by politicians and special interest groups with their own agendas in mind. This debate is of increasing importance as the number of bilingual students in Texas schools continues to rise and the Hispanic minority becomes the new majority. Recent debate on illegal immigration and continued anti-immigrant/pro-immigrant sentiment (as evidenced by the recent demonstrations in Irving and legislation in towns such as Farmers branch and throughout the U.S) are likely to have an impact on these debates. In an effort to answer the above question, two research articles were reviewed and analyzed, and their differences noted. One is for English immersion and the other against immersion and for bilingual education.

## **Research design**

The first study summarizes the results of California's proposition 227 based on standardized test scores of LEP students in reading, language, and math. Proposition 227

“English for the children” initiative was passed in 1998 with 61% of the vote. It reversed 20 years of bilingual education and mandated English immersion for LEP students. The study gathers data from three years of test scores on the Stanford 9 obtained through California’s Standardized Testing and Reporting system (STAR). The results according to Allison & Amselle (2000) show that English immersion did not harm students but in fact helped students make significant gains in reading and writing English as well as math. Allison & Amselle argue that the greatest gains were made in districts that adopted the strictest interpretation of the initiative and implemented the most intensive English immersion programs. They contend that scores in schools that still implemented bilingual education remained stagnant.

The second research is a qualitative study of 10 Cambodian-Americans, former students in a large urban school district in southern California. They arrived in the U.S from war torn Cambodia in the 80’s and enrolled in the district. None of them were proficient in English, but all were placed in English only classes with teachers who were not certified to teach ELL. This, according to Wright (2004) was a failure on the districts part to implement state and federal policies that were applicable at that time. As a result, the students were placed in situations similar to the one mandated by proposition 227. Wright argues that this led to weaker primary language skills, weaker mastery of English, problems with self identity, and difficulties at home, work, and college. Wright contends that English immersion programs fall short in “...meeting linguistic and cultural needs of ELL, and may lead to negative consequences for students in their adult lives.” (Wright, 2004, p. 1). Data was obtained through interviewing, using open-ended questions developed by Wright.

### **Subject selection and assignment.**

The Allison & Amselle study included the entire population of students in the second through sixth grades in the state of California. The information, collected through California's STAR system, tracked three years of test scores for LEP students after the passing of proposition 227. The scores showed that all LEP students improved in their reading, math and language national percentile rankings. Allison & Amselle however noted that improvement in the lower grades was greater than improvement in the latter grades. For example the second grade improved from the 19<sup>th</sup> percentile in reading in 1998 to the 28<sup>th</sup> percentile in 2000, while in the same time period, the sixth grade only improved from the 16<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 19<sup>th</sup> percentile. This trend held true for both language and math scores across all grades. Allison & Amselle argued that this showed younger students benefited the most from English immersion while older students, because they had bilingual education in earlier grades, did not perform as well. Allison & Amselle also selected individual school districts which according to them, made intensive efforts to fully implement the English immersion program. (They do not explain how these schools were identified). One example is Oceanside city unified district, which according to the authors, made headlines with its impressive gains. For example, its second grade reading percentile rose from the 12<sup>th</sup> percentile in 1998 to the 32<sup>nd</sup> percentile in 2000. Such districts were compared to districts that did not fully implement proposition 227. For example, San Jose Unified School District was the only district legally exempted from the requirements of proposition 227. According to Allison & Amselle, San Jose showed some of the smallest improvements in ELL test scores. In

1998, second graders in the district ranked in the 18<sup>th</sup> percentile. This improved to the 19<sup>th</sup> percentile in 1999 and remained flat at 19<sup>th</sup> percentile in 2000.

The Wright study strategically selected 10 subjects. The subjects, five boys and five girls, were all born in Cambodia where they experienced disruptions in their education. The number of years of schooling they received in Cambodia ranged from zero years for the youngest participant to 5 1/2 years for the oldest. Those who received schooling in Cambodia reported at least a few hours of Khmer literacy instruction. They represented the 1.5 generation which Rumbaut & Ima (as cited in Wright, 2004) described as youths born in Cambodia or in refugee camps but raised in the U.S. These youths were caught in between generations and cultures, not fully being American or Cambodian. Because they had no records, all the participants experienced problems with grade level placement. Judgment on placement was based on age or ability. Some of the participants were moved to several grades within the same year as schools struggled to place them in the appropriate grade. Grade level placement upon arrival in the U.S ranged from Kindergarten to eleventh grade. According to Wright, all the participants received some ESL instruction though it was often “sporadic, insufficient, inappropriate, or in some cases, excessive.” (Wright, 2004, p.10). The subjects received little or no primary language support. Consequently all the participants reported having difficulty understanding lessons, leading to frustration and lack of confidence. Wright finds it interesting that the youngest subject, with zero years of education in Khmer, who entered the district in kindergarten, had the most difficulty with reading. Wright argues that this was because he was the only one of the ten who had no instruction in Khmer literacy before entering school in the U.S. This, interestingly, directly contradicts Allison &

Amselle's study, which as stated earlier, argued that younger students benefited the most from English immersion.

### **Reliability and validity**

The Allison & Amselle study uses data obtained from the Stanford 9, an instrument that is widely used and generally accepted for having good technical characteristics. Wright on the other hand uses open ended questions that he developed himself. The reliability and validity of his instrument is not discussed in the study. This limits the usefulness of his research.

### **Internal and external validity**

Wright does not take into account the numerous confounding variables that may have affected the academic performance of his subjects. His subjects are drawn from a population that had survived traumatic experiences. According to Chandler, (as cited in Wright, 2004) nearly one-third of Cambodians died in the genocide engineered by the Khmer Rouge regime. Many came from poor rural families with parents who had little or no formal education. According to Berthold (as cited in Wright 2004), many lived in poverty and often witnessed violence in their low socioeconomic neighborhoods. Wright claims that the participants received inadequate instruction in ESL. This, not the lack of bilingual education, could have been the cause for his subjects' academic troubles. Wright writes that he had over 17 years of personal and formal study of the Khmer language. He lived and worked in Cambodia and had extensive interaction with the Cambodian-American community. All the subjects he picked to participate in the study were his personal friends or acquaintances. This possibly increased chances for bias supporting Cambodian culture and bilingual education for Cambodians. According to

Charles & Mertler (2008), samples smaller than 30 are not likely to accurately represent populations. Wrights research had only 10 participants. This puts his research findings in doubt.

Allison & Amselle's study compared schools that strictly adhered to the requirements of proposition 227 to those that still implemented bilingual education. They did not explain how the schools that closely adhered to prop 227 were identified.

### **Conclusion**

Research on bilingual education versus English immersion is frustratingly inconclusive. For every study that concludes that bilingual education is not effective in meeting the needs of ELL students such as Baker & de Kanter, (as cited in Chen, Duran, Hakuta, Lambert, Lindholm, Padilla, & Tucker 1991) there is another that supports bilingual education such as Willig 1985 and Crawford 1989 (as cited in Chen, et al. 1991). Hamilton (2006) states that ultimately, it is not the language of instruction that counts but the quality of instruction. Dr. Amy Merickel, co-author of "Effects of the Implementation of Proposition 227 on the education of English Learners K-12." (As cited in Hamilton, 2006) states that "We don't see conclusive evidence that bilingual education is superior to English immersion, and we don't see conclusive evidence for the reverse. We think it's the wrong question. It's not the model of instruction that matters -- it's the quality." (Hamilton, 2006, Para 5)

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