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STRUCTURED ENGLISH IMMERSION PROGRAMS: RESEARCH AND BEST PRACTICES

At a Glance

This Information Capsule summarizes the research on Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs. Most school districts use either the SEI or Bilingual Education (BE) model to instruct elementary level English Language Learners (ELLs). In SEI programs, ELLs receive all or most of their instruction in English. BE programs provide instruction in two languages – the target language (English) and the student’s native language.

Studies comparing the effectiveness of SEI and BE programs have produced conflicting findings. There is, therefore, no consensus among researchers regarding the superiority of one instructional approach over the other. One notable exception is Canada’s Early French Immersion (EFI) program that teaches elementary English-speaking students in French. Studies have found that elementary students in EFI programs acquire higher levels of French language proficiency than students enrolled in BE programs and attain mastery of academic skills at a level that is equivalent to that of students studying in all-English programs by the end of elementary school.

Some researchers have concluded that the quality of the language acquisition program is more important than the instructional approach used to teach the language. In addition, they note that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model of instruction for ELLs. The characteristics of students, classroom teachers, schools, and local communities all affect program success.

Researchers have identified characteristics of successful elementary level SEI programs. These characteristics, including high-quality teachers, clearly defined student entry and exit criteria, and grouping of students by level of English language proficiency, are summarized in this report.

With growing numbers of English language learners (ELLs) entering elementary schools in the U.S., school districts have come under increasing pressure to ensure that these students develop proficiency in English and make academic progress each year. However, there has been an ongoing debate within the educational community over which instructional model is best suited to ELLs’ needs and will lead to a greater reduction in the achievement gap between ELLs and their English-speaking peers (Wood, 2014; Liu, 2013; Saunders, 2013; Clark, 2009; Jost, 2009; Moughamian et al., 2009).

Most school districts have selected one of two models of ELL instruction – Structured English Immersion or Bilingual Education programs, defined as follows:

- In Structured English Immersion (SEI) programs, students receive all or most of their instruction in English. SEI classes focus on teaching students the English language, with vocabulary, syntax, and content adapted to students' comprehension level. Academic content plays a supporting role in SEI classes. Students are usually grouped together according to their level of English language ability. Instructional staff are not required to speak a language other than English, although in some cases, classroom teachers or bilingual aides may offer students support in their native language, such as clarifying directions for an assignment or quiz (Liu, 2013; Livaccari, 2013; Saunders, 2013; Clark, 2009; Cummins, 2009; Moughamian et al., 2009; Sievert, 2007; Gersten, 2000).

It should be noted that SEI programs differ from submersion or “sink or swim” programs in which non-English speakers are placed in mainstream classes alongside native English speakers, with no instructional supports available to help students understand instruction or express themselves in either language (Cummins, 2009; Torrance, 2005; Gersten, 2000).

- Bilingual Education (BE) programs are also referred to as dual language programs or two-way immersion programs. They provide literacy and content instruction to ELLs in both English and students' native language. When students have attained sufficient proficiency in English, instruction in the native language is discontinued and students are transitioned into mainstream classes taught exclusively in English (Anderson, 2015; Hanover Research, 2014; Wood, 2014; Liu, 2013; Pacific Policy Research Center, 2010; Cummins, 2009; Moughamian et al., 2009; Clark, 2000).

Proponents of BE maintain that two-language instruction leads to stronger literacy skills and narrowing of achievement gaps. They argue that BE facilitates cross-linguistic transfer, in which students' native language skills facilitate the acquisition of their second language skills (Anderson, 2015; Tong et al., 2008). Advocates of SEI, on the other hand, point to studies indicating that students demonstrate higher levels of English language proficiency when they are provided with more intensive exposure to English. In addition, they claim that BE delays students' learning of the English language on the mistaken assumption that they need formal instruction in their native language before they can learn a second language (Hanover Research, 2014; Tong et al., 2008; Genesee, 2007; Wesche, 2002; Chavez, 2000).

Research Comparing Structured English Immersion and Bilingual Education Programs

Studies comparing the effectiveness of elementary level SEI and BE programs have produced conflicting findings. There is therefore no consensus among researchers regarding the superiority of one instructional approach over the other (Wood, 2014; Saunders, 2013; Tong et al., 2008; Cummin, 2009).

Some results have favored BE programs. They indicate that BE programs are more effective than SEI programs in increasing students' English language proficiency and overall academic achievement (Mongeau, 2016; Anderson, 2015; Gándara, 2015; Wood, 2014; Saunders, 2013; Jost, 2009; Moughamian et al., 2009; Tong et al., 2008; Rolstad et al., 2005).

A few studies have concluded that BE programs produce more positive outcomes than SEI programs in the long term. They have found that students who were taught in SEI classrooms

during elementary school gradually lost ground to students who were taught in BE programs. By middle school, students who were taught in elementary BE classrooms outperformed students who were taught in elementary SEI classrooms on a variety of academic and linguistic performance measures (Myers, 2014; Jost, 2009).

In contrast, a second group of studies has reported that students who participate in SEI programs have higher levels of second language proficiency and academic achievement than students who are enrolled in BE programs. Research also indicates that participation in SEI programs does not impair students' first language skills (Fortune, 2012; Torrance, 2005; Baker, 1999; Gaffney, 1999; Lass, n.d.).

Finally, a third set of studies has found no difference in the English language proficiency or academic achievement levels of elementary students who were taught in SEI and BE programs (Gándara, 2015; Wood, 2014; Jost, 2009; Sievert, 2007; Parrish et al., 2006). These findings have led some researchers to conclude that the quality of the language acquisition program is even more important than the instructional approach used to teach the language (Wood, 2014; Tong et al., 2008). Gándara (2015) noted that “no particular instructional program – whether it is English immersion or bilingual instruction – is a panacea. Without adequately prepared (bilingual) teachers, good curriculum, and programs that combat the effects of poverty and marginalization that the majority of these students face, there is little hope of significantly closing achievement gaps.”

Experts have also concluded that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model of instruction for ELLs. What works for one student does not necessarily work for another. For some students, full immersion in a new language is the best way to learn, but for others, it is too difficult to learn a second language without references to their first language. The characteristics of classroom teachers, schools, and local communities also affect program success (Liu, 2013; Livaccari, 2013; Jost, 2009; Moughamian et al., 2009; Chen, 2008).

Structured English Immersion Programs in California and Arizona

In 1998, California voters approved Proposition 227. This initiative replaced over 20 years of state-mandated BE with SEI programs. Schools were required to teach ELLs “overwhelmingly in English” through SEI programs during “a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year” and then transfer students to mainstream English language classrooms (Parrish et al., 2006; Chavez, 2000).

It should be noted that in November 2016, Californians voted “yes” on Proposition 58, which repealed Proposition 227’s English-only instructional requirement. The State’s public schools are now allowed to use a variety of programs, including BE, to teach ELLs (Ballotpedia, 2016; Mongeau, 2016).

No definitive conclusions on the impact of eliminating BE from California schools have been drawn. Several studies concluded that the English language proficiency of California’s ELLs increased once SEI programs replaced BE programs statewide (Torrance, 2005; Chavez, 2000). Other researchers, however, claim that these studies were flawed and that the elimination of BE programs did not lead to higher levels of English language proficiency (Jost, 2009).

Findings of studies conducted on the impact of Arizona’s Proposition 203 have also been mixed. Proposition 203, the “English Language Education for Children in Public Schools Act,” was

approved by Arizona voters in November 2000. The Act repealed the State's BE laws and mandated that ELLs be educated through SEI programs, with classroom instruction and materials provided predominantly in English (Arizona Department of Education, 2014; Ballotpedia, 2000).

While some studies have found that Arizona's change from BE to SEI programs resulted in higher levels of English language proficiency, other studies found no change in ELLs' levels of English language proficiency after BE was eliminated (Gambino, 2011; Jost, 2009). An audit conducted by the State of Arizona's Office of the Auditor General (2011) reported that SEI models had not been fully implemented in the majority of the State's school districts. In 2010, for example, 63% of districts did not fully implement all SEI model requirements. The Auditor General's office therefore concluded that SEI programs' impact on Arizona ELLs could not be determined.

Early French Immersion Programs

Canada is known as a leader in the development of second language acquisition programs. All provinces support the learning of the second official language (French in English Canada, and English in Quebec). Early French Immersion (EFI) programs were developed in Canada in the 1960s in an effort to increase English-speaking students' proficiency in French (Cummins, 2014; Sievert, 2007; Wesche, 2002).

In EFI programs, elementary level Canadian students who do not speak French as their first language receive at least 70% to 100% of their instruction in French. Kindergarten students whose first language is English are immersed in French language instruction for at least two years prior to the introduction of formal teaching of English Language Arts, which is typically introduced in second grade. By fourth grade, 50% of the instructional time is spent in each language. Immersion programs in Canada differ from immersion programs in the U.S. because Canadian programs immerse students in a minority language (French), whereas programs in the U.S. immerse students in the majority language (English) (Cummins, 2009; Sievert, 2007).

Research on the effectiveness of Canada's EFI programs indicates that they have a positive impact on students' acquisition of the French language and are not detrimental to students' overall academic performance. Key findings include:

- EFI students acquire advanced levels of functional proficiency in French and are more proficient in French than students enrolled in conventional foreign language programs (40 minutes per day) (Genesee, 2007; Wesche, 2002).
- The French language proficiency outcomes of students taught in EFI classes are higher than those of students taught in 50/50 programs – programs that use French and English for an equal amount of time in kindergarten through sixth grade (Wesche, 2002).
- EFI students' receptive skills in French are better developed, in relation to native speaker norms, than their expressive skills. By the end of elementary school, students are close to the level of native speakers in understanding and reading formal French, but there are significant gaps between EFI students and native speakers in spoken and written French. The gap is most evident in the areas of vocabulary and grammar (Cummins, 2014; Genesee, 2007; Wesche, 2002).

- EFI students attain mastery of academic subjects at a level that is equivalent to that of similar students studying in all-English programs. Studies have shown that EFI students' test scores catch up to the scores of students taught in English within one year of their introduction to formal English language arts. By fifth grade, there are usually no differences in test scores (across academic subjects) between EFI students and students whose instruction was entirely in English (Cummins, 2014; Genesee, 2007; Wesche, 2002).
- Instruction provided entirely in French in the early elementary grades produces no long-term negative effects on students' English oral or literacy skills (Wesche, 2002; Turnbull et al., 2000).

Characteristics of Successful Structured English Immersion Programs

Researchers have identified the following characteristics of effective elementary level SEI programs:

- **SEI classes are staffed with high-quality teachers.** Studies have found that successful SEI programs are staffed with teachers who have the knowledge and skills necessary to support ELLs' special needs. SEI teachers are not just language teachers, but also elementary teachers – they must know how to articulate and teach linguistic objectives as well as content objectives. In addition, they should be highly proficient in the English language, since they are the model from which students build their English diction, grammar, and expressions (Singmaster, 2016; Cummins, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014; Livaccari, 2013; Fortune, 2012; Parrish et al., 2006; Siano, 2000).

Fortune (2012) noted that SEI teachers must be prepared to face significant hurdles due to the wide range of learner differences in their classrooms. She explained that the impact of students' variations in language proficiency, literacy development, learning style, and learning support available in the home grows exponentially in the SEI classroom.

- **Teachers are provided with ongoing professional development.** Researchers emphasize the importance of ongoing professional development for SEI teachers, who need specialized training in order to meet the needs of ELLs, while simultaneously addressing content and language acquisition. SEI teachers should participate in activities that help them develop an awareness and understanding of the interdependence of language and content. In addition, professional development should provide SEI teachers with information about the ELLs in their classroom and about effective pedagogical strategies for ELLs (Hanover Research, 2014; Fortune, 2012; Torrance, 2005; Baker, 1999; Gaffney, 1999).

Murakami (cited in Saunders, 2013) interviewed primary school educational staff in a rural area of England that had experienced an increase in the number of ELLs attending its schools. When asked what types of professional development would increase their confidence when teaching elementary level ELLs, respondents' answers included (1) a

chance to observe good practice; (2) a chance to collaborate with other teachers to share resources and strategies; and (3) more on-the-job training.

When the State of Arizona implemented Proposition 203 in 2000, all SEI teachers were required to participate in three sets of training:

- Implementation Training – This training provided background information on the policy, principles, structures, and classroom practices of the SEI program.
 - English Language Proficiency Standards Training – All SEI teachers received training on the content of the State’s English Language Proficiency Standards.
 - English Language Development Teaching Methods Training – SEI teachers received training on the methods and strategies to be used when teaching English language development (Arizona Department of Education, 2014).
- **Student entry and exit criteria are clearly defined.** Educators must decide upon the specific criteria that will be used to determine which students will enter SEI programs and when students will exit SEI programs. Usually, SEI programs include students who have insufficient English oral comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Most school districts use English language proficiency tests and decide on cut-off scores for entry into and exit from SEI programs. At the lower grades, it is often adequate to base placement decisions on the use of an oral test only (Clark, 2000).

Upon exiting SEI programs, many districts place students into “transitional” or “bridge” programs. These programs provide a mix of English language instruction and mainstream academic instruction, offering additional instructional support to students who do not yet have a full range of English language skills (Torrance, 2005; Clark, 2000).

- **Students are grouped by their level of English language proficiency.** Several experts have recommended that students should be grouped into SEI classrooms based on their level of English language proficiency. They maintain that students are more comfortable and more likely to take risks in expressing themselves when they feel they are in a safe environment. In addition, they believe that a greater sense of community develops when students in the class have similar levels of English language proficiency (Cummins, 2009; Siano, 2000; Lass, n.d.).
- **Teachers use all available instructional strategies to support ELLs’ linguistic and academic success.** Researchers have suggested that the following instructional techniques lead to increased English language proficiency for elementary ELLs, as well as higher levels of achievement in academic content areas:
 - Provide students with as many opportunities as possible to practice English.
 - Focus on all aspects of language development, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking.
 - Engage in ongoing curriculum adaptation to meet ELLs’ unique learning needs.
 - Connect students’ knowledge and prior experiences to the new content.

- Use a variety of instructional delivery styles to accommodate ELLs' different learning styles – visual, aural, and kinesthetic. The overall instructional style should be hands-on, not lecture-based.
 - Use manipulatives, graphic organizers, pictures, and videos, which help ELLs develop comprehension without the need for direct explanation.
 - Use all possible means of communication, including body language, gestures, exaggerated facial expressions, and expressive intonations to maximize student comprehension.
 - Ask open-ended questions that activate students' higher order cognitive skills. Teachers should give students ample time to explain their responses and ask students to expand upon or support their answers with examples or evidence.
 - Use illustrated books to generate student interest, expand vocabulary, and provide opportunities for discussions.
 - Incorporate songs and games into lessons to provide students with opportunities to hear and reproduce English naturally.
 - Use drawings and other types of art work as a tool for experiential writing and oral discussion.
 - Include culturally relevant myths, legends, and fables in lessons to help students create context for the English language (Cleaver, 2013; Livaccari, 2013; Moughamian et al., 2009; Torrance, 2005; Fortune & Tedick, 2003; Wesche, 2002; Gersten, 2000; Goldberg, 2000; Siano, 2000; Gaffney, 1999).
- **Students are fully engaged in classroom activities.** Studies have found that SEI programs are more successful when students remain engaged in classroom activities. Research-based recommendations for keeping ELLs engaged in the classroom include:
 - Instruction continues at a steady pace.
 - Lessons are academically challenging and extend students' efforts slightly beyond their capabilities.
 - Students are provided with opportunities to experience some degree of success each day.
 - Students' knowledge and real-life experiences are connected to classroom instruction.
 - A dynamic learning environment is created through a variety of interaction formats, including student partnerships, small group discussions, and whole group instruction (Livaccari, 2013; Jost, 2009; Moughamian et al., 2009; Wesche, 2002; Gersten, 2000; Siano, 2000).
- **Students engage in collaborative learning.** Studies have shown that high-achieving SEI classrooms encourage collaborative learning, with students frequently working together in small groups. Small group learning allows students to discuss their ideas with other students, check each other's work, and feel confident in their answer before sharing it with the entire class (Sparks, 2016; Saunders, 2013; Moughamian et al., 2009; Hayes et al., 2002).

- **Teachers provide students with positive feedback.** Researchers have noted that successful SEI teachers provide students with immediate positive reinforcement (Gersten, 2000; Siano, 2000; Lass, n.d.). A study of high- and low-achieving SEI classrooms in the Los Angeles Unified School District found that teachers in higher achieving classrooms praised students more frequently. Conversely, teachers' feedback in lower performing classrooms tended to be more negative (Hayes et al., 2002).
- **SEI classrooms are provided with developmentally appropriate instructional resources.** Researchers agree that SEI classrooms should be provided with adequate resources and support to facilitate students' second language acquisition and academic success (Hanover Research, 2014; Saunders, 2013; Fortune, 2012; Parrish et al., 2006; Torrance, 2005). Cleaver (2013) recommended that SEI programs incorporate online resources into instruction. Benefits of online resources cited by Cleaver (2013) include:
 - Students can strengthen their English language skills by downloading software that allows them to participate in their own learning, such as vocabulary worksheets, pronunciation guides, videos, and educational games.
 - Students are able to work at their own pace.
 - Students feel comfortable taking risks when talking to the computer and are not afraid to make mistakes.
- **Teachers monitor students' language development through frequent assessment.** SEI programs have been found to be more successful when teachers frequently monitor student progress and adjust their use of English to ensure that content is understood (Singmaster, 2016; Cleaver, 2013; Livaccari, 2013; Parrish et al., 2006; Torrance, 2005; Gersten, 2000; Siano, 2000). Hayes and colleagues' (2002) study of SEI programs in the Los Angeles Unified School District found that teachers in higher-achieving classrooms tended to ensure student language comprehension by engaging in activities such as frequent comprehension checks and student questioning.
- **Parents support SEI programs.** Experts recommend that school officials educate parents about SEI programs so they can better support their children's English language acquisition. Parents' lack of commitment to learning English and their low expectations of their children have been cited as potential barriers for ELLs and are challenges that schools must work to overcome. Research shows that students whose parents have positive attitudes toward the English language are more successful in SEI programs than students whose parents have less favorable attitudes (Saunders, 2013; Canadian Parents for French, 2007; Torrance, 2005; Gaffney, 1999).
- **There is program continuity across grade levels and content areas.** Researchers emphasize that district plans for ELL instruction should be carefully articulated across classes within grades, across grades within schools, and across schools within the district (Moughamian et al, 2009; Parrish et al., 2006).

Summary

This Information Capsule summarized the research on SEI programs. Most school districts have selected one of two models for ELL instruction – SEI or BE. Students in SEI programs receive all or most of their instruction in English. In BE programs, instruction is provided in two languages – the target language (English) and the student’s native language.

Studies comparing the effectiveness of elementary level SEI and BE programs have produced conflicting findings. There is, therefore, no consensus among researchers regarding the superiority of one instructional approach over the other. Some studies indicate that BE programs are more effective than SEI programs in increasing students’ English language proficiency and overall academic achievement. Other studies report more favorable outcomes for students participating in SEI programs. Still others find no difference in the English language proficiency or achievement of students participating in BE and SEI programs. Research conducted on SEI programs in California and Arizona, two states that eliminated BE through voter-approved state statutes, has not conclusively determined the impact of replacing BE programs with SEI programs on students’ English language proficiency in either state.

One notable exception to the mixed research findings is the consistently positive outcomes found for elementary students in Canada’s EFI programs, designed to increase English-speaking students’ proficiency in French. Researchers have reported the following results: EFI students acquire higher levels of French language proficiency than students taught in BE programs or conventional foreign language programs; EFI students attain mastery of academic subjects at a level that is equivalent to that of similar students studying in all-English programs by the end of elementary school; and instruction provided entirely in French in the early elementary grades does not impair students’ English oral or literacy skills in the later grades.

Some researchers have suggested that the quality of the language acquisition program is more important than the instructional approach used to teach the language. In addition, they note that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model of instruction for ELLs. The characteristics of students, classroom teachers, schools, and local communities all affect program success.

This report also summarized the characteristics of successful elementary level SEI programs, including high-quality teachers; ongoing professional development for SEI teachers; clearly defined student entry and exit criteria; grouping of students by level of English language proficiency; teachers’ use of all available instructional strategies to support ELLs’ linguistic and academic success; and program continuity across grade levels and content areas.

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