

Bilingual education has become a political tool for ethnic leaders as well as an educational establishment in itself. What do the scores reveal about its success rate? The article below is a press release from Research in English Acquisition and Development, Inc. (READ).

Do Bilingual Programs Work?

Study Finds that Immersion Boosts Student Achievement

When it comes to finding the best way to educate students whose first language isn't English, educators and researchers after 25 years of study and numerous programs are still deeply divided. To make the educational playing field level, some argue that the best way to teach students English is to gradually introduce them to the language through so-called transitional bilingual education programs. Others say that transitional programs made "second class" students out of non-English speaking children. They argue that students fare better when they're given special programs in English rather than years of instruction in the native language.

While the report of a new study produced early in 1992 does not resolve the debate, it does shed new light on what is one of the most contentious issues in educational policy.

Commissioned by the READ Institute, a non-profit, nonpartisan research organization in Washington, DC, the study, "Bilingual Immersion: A Longitudinal Evaluation of the El Paso Program," looked at the "last academic effects" of bilingual immersion and transitional bilingual education, two distinctly different approaches to teaching language-minority students in the El Paso, Texas, public schools. Immersion program students are taught all subjects in English from the first day of school, with 60-90 minutes daily of Spanish language lessons. Practically the opposite is true for students in transitional bilingual education classes: they are taught all subjects in Spanish, with 60-90 minutes a day of English lessons.

Overall, the study found that students who had been taught using transitional bilingual methods were not better off academically than those who had received instruction in the immersion classes. "The correlation between improved student performance and transitional bilingual education just isn't there," said READ board member Rosalie Pedalino Porter, author of *Forked Tongue: The Politics of Bilingual Education* [Reviewed in *The Social Contract*, Winter 1990-91]. "In fact this study shows students in the English immersion classrooms outperform the comparison group in all subjects when tested in grades 4, 5 and 6. Not until the end of the seventh grade do the transitional bilingual education students catch up to the others."

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For the study, researchers Russell Gersten and John Woodward of the Eugene Research Institute at the University of Oregon, and Susan Schneider of the El Paso public schools, looked at how two comparable groups of limited English students performed in grades 4, 5, 6 and 7 on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), a standardized achievement test given annually to students in the El Paso public schools. Student performance on the ITBS was analyzed in the areas of language, reading, mathematics, and vocabulary. The researchers found:

- Fourth-grade students in immersion classes outperformed their peers in transitional bilingual education classes in all aspects of academic performance, particularly language skills. By the end of the 7th grade, the differences in the performance of the two groups all but disappeared.
- Fourth- and fifth-grade students in immersion programs had higher scores on the reading portion of ITBS, and, again, by the end of the seventh grade the difference in the reading scores of immersion and transitional bilingual students was negligible.
- No significant statistical differences between the mathematics performance of students in immersion classrooms and those in transitional bilingual education classrooms.
- Fifth-grade students in immersion programs had higher vocabulary scores than those in transitional bilingual education programs, but the latter group caught up with their peers by the end of the seventh grade.
- By grade 6, 99 percent of the immersion students are no longer in a special program but are completely mainstreamed. In contrast, 35 percent of transitional bilingual education students are still in TBE programs at the end of the seventh

grade.

Based on these findings it is clear that the immersion program allows students to learn English well enough to be integrated into fully English speaking classrooms within 4-5 years, while one-third or more of the transitional bilingual education students still remain in special programs after six or seven years. In a time of tightening school budgets, the data argue that transitional bilingual education may not be the most cost-effective way to educate language minority children

READ's Porter says the study's "mixed" results send a strong signal to educational policymakers that a variety of methods are needed to help second language students develop the English skills they will need to meet world-class standards. "The data definitely dispel the notion that transitional bilingual education is a superior approach to English immersion," Porter said. "While both methods seem equally effective for teaching language-minority children, they take different periods of time to achieve the same academic results for these students. Certainly we should use the most effective practices to help students enter the mainstream as quickly and successfully as possible." ■

[Copies of "Bilingual Immersion: A Longitudinal Evaluation of the El Paso Program" are available for \$9.95 each, prepaid. For further information contact the READ Institute, 1920 "N" Street, NW, Suite 430, Washington, DC 20036; (202)857-5650, Fax: (202)452-9808. Discounts are available on orders of ten or more copies.]