

Closing the Achievement Gap for Hispanic

English Language Learners in Utah

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Abstract

Society cannot afford to squander its human capital. It has the duty to educate its population. English language learners, an increasing percentage of this country's K-12 education system, have consistently underachieved in our public schools. Recent empirical studies by the U.S. Department of Education have shown that the use of English language learners' first language for instruction is the most effective way to close this achievement gap. In the past, laws passed to protect English language learners' right to an education have given them access to the education system through language support programs. Yet, in the last few decades, English-only immersion legislation has opposed bilingual education programs. The states that have implemented English-only programs, like Arizona and California, have seen a disproportionate amount of English language learners referred to special education. Although many factors contribute to English language learners' English proficiency, instruction in language learners' first language, which is used in Dual Language Immersion Programs, has proven to be a successful approach. This project answers the question of the effectiveness of dual language immersion or Dual Language Immersion Programs in closing the academic achievement gap between English language learners and native English speakers in Utah. Future data collection of Utah's Criterion Reference Tests of Hispanic students who participate in Dual Language Immersion Programs for a period of five years or more must be developed to determine if Dual Language Immersion Programs close the achievement gap in Utah.

Key words: Dual language education, bilingual education, dual language immersion, dual language immersion, English language learners, language minority students, Limited English proficiency

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Studies have shown that Dual Language Immersion Programs help students attain high levels of second language proficiency by using the child's first language in instruction. Do Dual Language Immersion Programs close the achievement gap between native English speakers and Hispanic English language learners? This project reviews literature and case studies that address this question. Dual Language Immersion Programs, if implemented correctly, can close Utah's achievement gap between English language learners and native English speakers by helping students acquire academic language proficiency.

Background

Dual Language Immersion

Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Programs, or Dual Language Immersion Programs, have become popular all over the country and are perceived by many as the new face of bilingual education—without the stigma (Watanabe, 2011). The Center for Applied Linguistics (2012) reported that as of December 5, 2012, their Directory listed 422 Two-Way Bilingual Immersion Programs in 31 states, and Washington, D.C.

Dual Language Immersion is a bilingual education program based on the theory of linguistic minorities' integration with the dominant majority (Peleato, 2011). In bilingual education, English and the country's predominant language, a second language, are used for instruction through a variety of instructional approaches. In the United States, Dual Language Immersion is an enriching instructional approach that uses English and the child's native language, like Spanish, to help the child acquire English proficiency. The Dual Language Immersion, or two-way immersion model, divides instruction between two classrooms: A

percentage of the day the students are immersed in English and the other percentage they are immersed in a second language. The English teacher instructs students in the English language a percentage of the day in English language arts, reading, writing, and spelling, as well as other subjects of the curriculum. The second language teacher instructs students in the second language for the other percentage in literacy, math, and other subjects of the State Core Curriculum. Students learn in an enriching academic environment (Utah's Spanish Dual Language Immersion Program Brochure, 2012). Although this model works best when half of the students are English speakers and the other half speaks the second language, ideally neither language group should fall below 30% of the classroom population. A heterogeneous mix of students means English language learners (ELLs) are not segregated in a program with a "watered down" curriculum. Thus, each group can serve as a linguistic resource and as peer models for each other. If this program is implemented successfully, after five years students are expected to be fluent in two languages (Cummins, 1981b; Peleato, 2011; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Federal Law Protections for Limited English Proficient Students

According to Gallimore and Goldenberg (2001), the underachievement of ethnic minority students has been a national issue since the Supreme Court outlawed segregated schools in 1954. Significant in granting Federal civil rights protection for students with limited English proficiency have been Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974. In addition, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act case, *Castaneda v. Pickard* (1981) set legal standards and a Federal framework of protection for limited English proficient student rights (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1997). For example, in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), the Court's

judgment stated that students who do not understand English “are excluded from any meaningful education and are going to find their classroom experiences incomprehensible and in no way meaningful” (as cited in U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1997, p.67). Since then, to comply with the law, states have used varied and multiple methods to respond to these laws. Such instructional programs have adopted a variety of educational approaches ranging from total English immersion to various types of bilingual education (as cited in U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1997). Regardless of these legal protections, in 1998, in California, only 30% of limited English proficient students received any form of bilingual education (Cummins, J., 1981b).

The Politics of Bilingual Education

Opposing viewpoints to bilingual education are evident in the development of new English-only legislation in some states. Among the supporters of English-only legislation was Arthur M. Schlesinger, a renowned liberal who passed away in 2007. He believed the institutionalization of bilingual education would fragment the nation (Schlesinger, 1998). He defended the old-fashioned American melting pot against political correctness and multiculturalism and he saw these as forces disuniting America. Schlesinger (1998) feared that the bonds of cohesion of our national heritage would be weakened by linguistic apartheid. Another supporter of English instruction has been *U.S English*, a nonprofit organization that promotes English as the common language of the United States. According to Imhoff (1990), the position of *U.S. English* is that only English should be used as the language of instruction in the U.S.

In the 1990s, after dealing with the challenge to educate more than a million limited English proficient (LEP) immigrants, California constituencies started questioning the effectiveness of their bilingual programs. California citizens perceived bilingual education as a

handout for immigrant families and immigrants viewed it as an ineffective remedial program for LEPs. It became such a controversial issue that in 1998 voters passed Proposition 227, a referendum aimed at eliminating the use of bilingual children's first language (L1) for instructional purposes. Under this initiative, all children in California public schools were to be instructed in English. California voted for English-only instruction, and seventeen other states followed suit, among them Arizona and Massachusetts (Rossell, 2003). After Proposition 227 passed, Rossell (2003) and many others believed English language learners would transition into English within one or two years. Flash forward to 2011-- a newspaper in California, *Los Angeles Times*, reported that Proposition 227's assertion that English immersion was more successful than bilingual education was wrong. The *L.A. Times* reported that from 2003 to 2010, the gap between English learners and all students had widened, with ELLs falling behind all other students (Watanabe, 2011).

Furthermore, in an English-only state, Arizona, Sullivan (2011) found that because of lack of language supports, English language learners are being identified as students with learning disabilities and placed in special education in disproportionate rates. Teachers cannot tell if the students are struggling because of a learning disability or a language barrier (Linan-Thompson, 2010). This places an undue burden on the Special Education program and does not meet the needs of ELLs that are improperly placed in these classes. Moreover, lack of achievement can also give these students a sense of inferiority which may affect their ability and motivation to learn and slow down the process of language acquisition. This issue weakens the argument of the effectiveness of English-only instruction for ELLs.

Dual Language Immersion in Utah

Utah, a state with smaller minority populations, has not experienced the heated political bilingual debates that California and other states have. Up until 2008, Utah, in compliance with the English Acquisition Act (2002), has instructed English language learners through a Sheltered Instruction approach program. The program is called English as a Second Language (ESL). ESL is a pullout tutoring program mixed with regular classroom instruction, wherein English Learners in Utah are supported and instructed in English. It is designed to transition students into full English instruction within a year or two (Rossell, 2003). Until 2008, English language learners, for the most part, learned English through this instructional approach. In 2008, Utah legislators in the House and Senate introduced the “International Education Initiative –Critical Languages Program” bill, which amended section 53A-15-104 and enacted section 53A-15-105 of the Utah Code. This bill modified Utah’s Critical Languages Program and established a Dual Language Immersion Program with target languages in Chinese, French, Portuguese and Spanish. School districts do not pay any of the cost of implementing this program and do not need to hire extra teachers; just teachers with bilingual skills. It doesn’t cost more.

In 2010, Governor Gary Herbert issued a challenge to implement 100 Dual Language Immersion Programs throughout Utah by 2014. As of now, 78 programs have been implemented in 17 school districts and two charters. Although the goal is to have 100 Dual Language Immersion Programs in the state by 2014, these programs will not meet the needs of all ELLs in Utah. The rest of limited English proficient (LEP) students in the state will continue to receive English language support through English as a Second Language (ESL) sheltered instruction.

Performance Data

Academic Performance of Hispanic ELLs in Utah

Criterion Reference Tests from the Utah State Office of Education have consistently shown an achievement gap between native English speakers and English language learners. This gap has been especially significant when it comes to Hispanic students (See Appendix A, Figures 1-3). Figure 1 and 3 illustrate the discrepancy in achievement between native English speakers and Hispanics English learners in Utah. For example, in 2012, 84% of native English speakers were proficient in Language Arts compared to 36% of Hispanics. Moreover, in the U.S. as a whole, Hispanic students account for three-quarters of the students with limited English proficiency (Thomas & Collier, 1996). Alarminglly, statistics indicate that Language-Minority (LM) students are 300% more likely to drop out of high school than other students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Most immigrants come to this country in search of the American Dream. Hispanics' inability to access proficiency in academic English is a barrier to their pursuit of higher education. As a result, Hispanics who drop out of High School are more likely to resort to crime. This is an important issue since demographic data indicates that English language learners are the fastest growing segment of the school-age population (Goldenberg, 2006). Goldenberg (2006) points out that by 2025 one in four public K-12 students will come from a home where a language other than English is spoken. He considers this discrepancy between English-speakers and English-learners an issue that should concern us all because of its large cost to society. Marginalized groups in Society aspire for the comfort and prosperity of the American system. Without an education, some Hispanic drop outs lose hope of the American Dream through legal means. Society can educate its population or pay to house them in jails. Nonetheless, society cannot afford to squander its human capital.

Case Studies

What are the advantages for ELLs who are being instructed in Dual Language Immersion Programs? Which is the most effective bilingual education model to help English language learners become proficient in English? My reviews of literature in this field support the use of instruction in both Language one (L1) and Language two (L2) in helping English language learners become proficient in language acquisition. Two recent major national meta-analyses have found that instruction in a student's native tongue helps close the achievement gap between native English speakers and English language learners.

Case study conducted by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence. Thomas and Collier (2002) were the first researchers to analyze data bases collected by school districts in all regions of the U.S. in the field of language minority education. They conducted a National five-year research study (1996-2001) with funding from the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) of the U.S. Department of Education. They collected 210,054 student records from five school districts. Although 80 primary languages were represented in the student samples, three of the five research sites focused on Spanish speakers.

Thomas and Collier (2002) concluded that 50-50 One-Way and Two-Way Bilingual education programs and 90-10 Two-Way Bilingual education programs “are the only programs that assist students to fully reach the 50th percentile in both Language one and Language two in all subjects and to maintain that level of high achievement or reach even higher levels through the end of schooling” (p.7). Note that in these bilingual programs, English speaking and Spanish speaking students are taught in their primary language. Researchers also found that the strongest predictor of student achievement in learning a second language was formal instruction in the

primary language (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Cummins, 1981b). Furthermore, Thomas and Collier (2002) found that when English language learners attend segregated, remedial programs, the students do not close the achievement gap after they are placed in the English mainstream. In other words, they don't reach the 50th percentile. Native-English speakers in Two-Way Bilingual programs equaled or outperformed their comparison monolingual groups on all measures. Moreover, not only do native English speakers not lose any cognitive abilities by learning a second language, but they also have cognitive advantages over their English-only peers (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Bialystok, 1994).

Case study conducted by the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority

Children and Youth. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education formed the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth and funded reviews of research on the development of literacy in second-language learners (August & Shanahan [Eds.], 2008). The panel was charged to examine and report on the research literature of the development of literacy in language minority students. As in the former study, the researchers concluded that the studies they reviewed demonstrated that both at the elementary and secondary levels, language-minority students instructed in their native language (usually Spanish) and English perform, on average, better than language-minority students instructed only in English (August & Shanahan, 2008). The author has found these findings apply to her experience as a second language learner. In her hometown in Mexico, she attended a bilingual school from the time she was five years old until she graduated from high school. In first grade, she started learning to read in English. She could not relate to the books or the language. It wasn't until the second grade, when she was taught in her native language, Spanish, that she started to learn to read in both languages. When she began reading books in Spanish, she started to make connections between sounds and letters and

between words and books. In sum, she learned from personal experience that it is important children learn to read in their native tongue, the language that draws on their background knowledge of language and expresses their culture and identity.

Application of Research Theory in Elementary Schools

Texas and California have implemented successful Dual Language Immersion Programs (Alanis & Rodriguez, 2008; Peleato, 2011). Among other factors in contributing to the success of these programs, has been instruction of ELLs in their native language. To illustrate the researchers' findings on the importance of using native language in curriculum instruction, the author reviewed the dual language model implemented in City Elementary, Texas. In addition, the author interviewed the principal of East Elementary in Cedar City, Utah, to find out how East Elementary's first year of dual language immersion is going.

City Elementary in Texas

City Elementary, "an inner city, urban-diverse campus, in south central Texas" (p. 308) implements a 90-10 Dual Language Immersion Program. Iliana Alanis and Mariela A. Rodriguez from the University of Texas at San Antonio conducted their case study in this school recognized for contributing to students' academic achievement (Alanis & Rodriguez, 2008). City Elementary's Dual Language Immersion Program has been educating children in English and Spanish since 1995. The study's sample consisted of 321 students with 85% economically disadvantaged, 87.8% Mexican American, and 29.4% Spanish only speakers. At City Elementary, English-speaking parents have the option of placing their students in the Two-Way program or in an all-English classroom. This is important because it stresses that dual language programs are not compulsory. Parents have a choice. In this 90-10 model, teachers instruct children in Spanish for 90% of the time and in English for 10% of the time in the first grade.

Gradually they decrease the amount of Spanish instruction until fourth and fifth grade when the percentage of instruction provided in English and Spanish is the same, 50-50

The researchers analyzed Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in reading, mathematics and science. Only fifth graders were part of the sampling. According to research by Thomas, Collier and Abbott (1993), there is a correlation between the length of time spent in a dual language bilingual program and student academic achievement. These researchers found that “significant differences in program effects become cumulatively larger as students continue past the third grade when the curriculum becomes cognitively more complex” (as cited in Alanis & Rodriguez, 2008, p. 310). Alanis and Rodriguez (2008) analysis began in 1999 when the first group of kindergarten students entered the fifth grade. When results were collected in 2000, the results were impressive (See Appendix B, Figures 1-3). English language learners consistently outperformed their English-only peers on standardized tests in the district and the state from 2000-2005. Reading Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores for limited English proficient (LEP) students from 2000-2005 were in the 80% to 100% range. It is important to note that tests were administered in English and that Spanish instruction did not hinder the development of English for either the native English speakers or the native Spanish speakers. TAKS scores for mathematics were the most impressive, 100% passing rate for LEPs! During a three year period, LEPs Science scores were in the 75% to 85% range compared to the rest of the state’s student scores which reflected 50% passing rates.

The researchers also identified important social factors that contribute to the sustainability of an effective program. Alanis and Rodriguez (2008) specified these factors as active parent participation, pedagogical equity, effective bilingual teachers, and knowledgeable leadership and continuity (Alanis & Rodriguez, 2008). It is important to note that in English-

only instructional programs, parental involvement is not possible for many Hispanic parents.

According to Henderson and Berla (1994), the most accurate predictor of student's achievement is parental involvement in their children's education.

East Elementary in Cedar City, Utah

East Elementary in Cedar City, Utah recently implemented the Dual Language Immersion Program. Mr. Burton, the principal was enthusiastic about the program (S. Burton, personal communication, April 2, 2013). The academic year 2012-2013 is East Elementary's first year with a Spanish-English Dual Language Immersion Program; therefore, there is no data on East Elementary's success with dual language immersion. When the author visited with Mr. Burton, he was quite enthusiastic about the program. He expressed how positive all parents are about their children being enrolled in a second language instruction program. Mr. Burton indicated that Dual Language Immersion Programs do not cost the district any more. They do not have to hire extra teachers or pay teachers more; they just have to hire different individuals who can actually teach in the target language. The author asked the principal how students were doing in the program. Mr. Burton told her about a Spanish speaking student who was in Kindergarten last year. This student would not talk at all. Mr. Burton was afraid the student had "Selective Mutism" or was having trouble acculturating. This year that student is enrolled in first grade's Dual Language Immersion Program. Mr. Burton recently observed a change in this student. The student is now more engaged in class activities and has become very self-confident. When the English Dual Language Immersion teacher had this student tested for Language Arts, test results indicated this boy had met state reading standards for his grade! He met the state's benchmarks! Mr. Burton is thrilled to see positive effects in the achievement of limited English proficient students in East Elementary's Dual Language Immersion Program.

Conclusion

Research supports the effectiveness of Two-Way Bilingual programs such as Dual Language Immersion. The use of English language learners' primary language in the referenced studies and schools suggest that maintenance of children's native language supports and facilitates transition into English, while strengthening a sense of ethnic identity. Research shows that native English speakers do not lose English language proficiency by participating in these programs, but that they gain cognitive abilities. Therefore, Dual Language Immersion Programs, when implemented correctly, have proven to be beneficial in helping Hispanics become proficient English learners and have helped close the achievement gap. Moreover, immigrants who receive an adequate education and achieve the American Dream contribute to the welfare of America and its prosperity. Future data collection of Utah's Criterion Reference Tests of Hispanic students who participate in Dual Language Immersion Programs for a period of five years or more must be developed to establish that Dual Language Immersion Programs close the achievement gap between Hispanics and native English speakers.

Appendix A

2012 Criterion Reference Test Scores for Utah Students

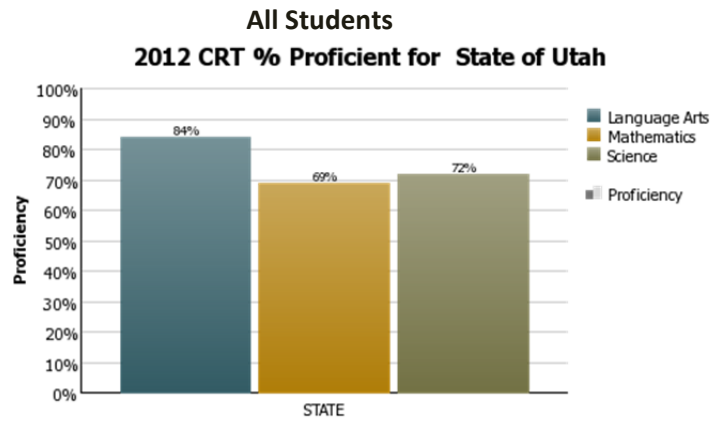


FIGURE 1 Utah State Office of Education 2012 Criterion Reference Tests.

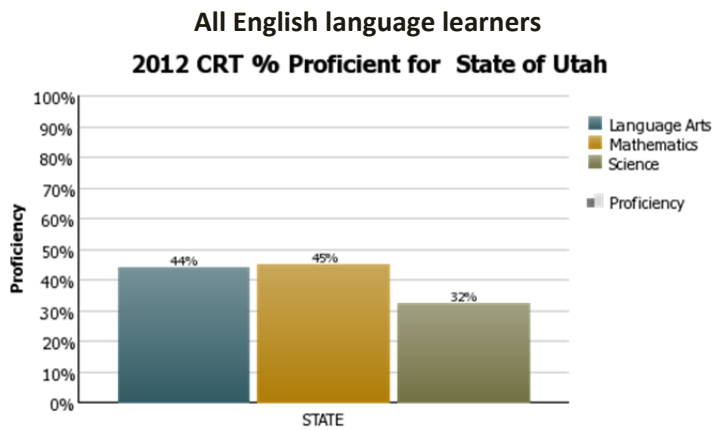


FIGURE 2 State Office of Education 2012 Criterion Reference Tests.

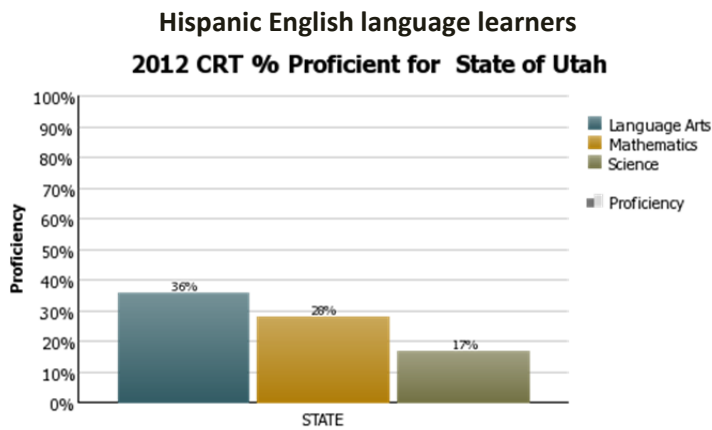
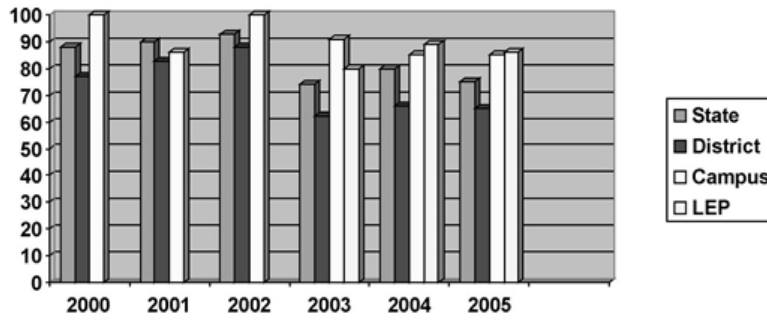


FIGURE 3 Utah State Office of Education 2012 Criterion Reference Tests

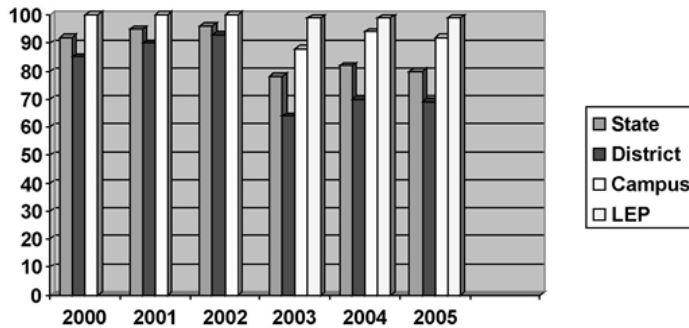
Appendix B

Three Figures Reflect City Elementary’s Scores in the Areas of English Reading, English Mathematics and English Science. (LEP = limited English proficient)



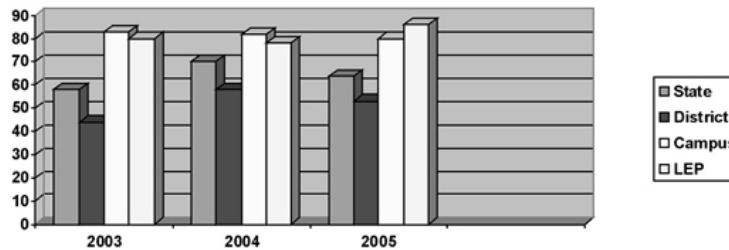
Source: Texas Education Agency.

FIGURE 1 Grade 5 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills: English reading. 2003 indicates a change in exam. LEP = limited English proficient.



Source: Texas Education Agency.

FIGURE 2 Grade 5 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills: English mathematics. 2003 indicates a change in exam. LEP = limited English proficient.



Source: Texas Education Agency.

FIGURE 3 Grade 5 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills: English science. 2003 indicates the first year science was assessed in Texas. LEP = limited English proficient.

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