

“We thought they had forgotten us:”

Research, policy and practice in the education of Latino immigrant adults

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Abstract:

This article discusses English-only policies as they relate to second language teaching for children and adults; explores popular perceptions and misconceptions about learning English; and discusses types of programs best suited for different students, depending on educational background. Examples from research and practice highlight the value of native language instruction in low-literate adults' acquisition of English, using a survey of the literature on English language acquisition and native language literacy. Links are made to current federal education policies with examples from practice. Programmatic use of “English-only” instruction is contrasted with bilingual and native language instruction.

Blanca had attended English as a Second Language (ESL) classes already on several occasions, dropping out and then back in again, by the time she enrolled into my beginning ESL class for adults. One day near the end of the term, she turned to me and said, "*Maestra*, when I learn English well enough, I am going to stop speaking Spanish forever!"

Perceptions of the use of native language in instruction

Though extreme, Blanca's attitude of "English, all or nothing" is not uncommon among adult immigrant students like her who are struggling to learn English and create a stable life for themselves in the United States, nor is it rare among education programs that offer them services. Her position is also shared by more than a few ESL teachers who insist on an English-only approach in their classrooms, assuming that more English exposure automatically results in more English learning, thus thwarting students' temptations to fall back onto what some teachers call the "crutch" of students' native language.

The arguments for exclusive use of English in the classroom have generally been that it improves language learning, maintains national unity, and is overall the "best" choice for all immigrant and language minority students (Crawford, 1992). Ironically, at a time of renewed interest in foreign language education, critics of bilingual education point to under-funded, poorly designed and poorly implemented bilingual programs, presenting them as the norm rather than the exception, in order to justify the eradication of bilingual education and native language instruction.¹ It is as if the existence of poorly performing schools should convince us that education is itself detrimental to students. Some misguided teachers who embrace the "more is better" approach go to such extremes that they tell adult students to stop using their first language and even urge immigrant parents to forego their native language at home in favor of English, ostensibly to benefit their school-age children.

Public Support of English Only

The English-only movement is not new, but has gained strength in the U.S. in recent years, fueled in part by widespread misconceptions about language learning, and also by racism and growing anti-immigrant sentiment. California's controversial Proposition 187, passed with a majority in 1994, aimed to deny social services and public education to undocumented immigrants and their children. Though federally overturned, it was followed by Proposition 227 in 1998, a bill that brought about the end of many bilingual programs and drastically scaled back programs in which students' native languages are used in instruction. Today, California parents must apply for a waiver to enroll their children in classes designed to provide native language instruction to support the development of academic English as well as in programs designed to promote fluency and bilingual literacy ("biliteracy") in English and another language. Subsequent movements in Arizona and Massachusetts to maintain English as the sole language of instruction in public schools have come at a time when debates about immigration, immigrants' rights, and U.S national boundaries are heated in the public sphere. At a time when well-designed bilingual programs struggle to find qualified bilingual teachers and the Department of Homeland Security seeks in vain for qualified multilingual staff, US. English claims that 28 states have adopted some form of an "Official English" law.

Schools play a central role in providing students with access to their native language, ascribing status to different languages, and in promoting language shift (the trend toward loss of one language in favor of another). Federally, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) has emphasized research-based practices at the same time that programs have shifted explicitly away from maintenance bilingual programs and native language instructional support toward more emphasis on English-only. It is perhaps telling that under NCLB, the office overseeing programs for

English learners was changed from the "Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs" (OBEMLA) to OELA, the "Office of English Language Acquisition."

English-only proponents, such as the organization *U.S. English*, use statistics on drop-out rates and low levels of post-secondary attainment among Latinos in the U.S. to negatively portray the prevalence of languages other than English (Tornatzy et al., 2002). HR 997, a bill that gained significant support in the Senate, was promoted by *U.S. English* as a "common sense" language policy with its goal of limiting routine government operations to English. Rather than cite research on language learning or link poor schooling to limited economic success and low post-secondary attainment, English-only groups draw a causal connection between the purported growth of multilingualism, the weakening of the economy and the increase in un-employment (U.S. English, 2006). Blanca was affected by the public debate and widespread misconceptions in her own attitudes toward her native language and English, her preference for English as "status" language (Wiley & Lukes, 1996), and her ultimate goal of English at all costs.

Public opinion on language education is strong and stubborn, based on personal experiences of learning one's own language, but also because many people have either succeeded or failed at learning a second language at home, a foreign language at school or have immigrant relatives who learned English in the recent or distant past. Add to this equation the political nature of the current immigration debate in which language is often a stand-in for race and ethnicity, and it is not surprising that debates about immigrant education are charged. Yet arguments like "it worked for my grandparents" provide merely anecdotal evidence and do not reflect the research upon which language teaching methodology is grounded.

Research on the use of the native language in instruction

Research on best practices in second language teaching and learning provides evidence about a range of ways that the native language can be useful in instruction. The most effective approaches incorporate students' languages and cultures into the curriculum (August & Hakuta, 1997) and use native language instruction as a stepping stone to age and developmentally appropriate activities (García, 2000). A review of experimental studies of reading for English Language Learners indicates that bilingual approaches work best (Slavin, 2003). Foundational language skills such as literacy transfer from the native language to the target language, serving as a base for further language acquisition (Cummins, 1979). Hence, the better an adult or young adult has been educated in his or her native language (regardless of the alphabetic system), the easier the task of learning a second language will be (Burt & Peyton, 2003). The body of research on adult English Language Learners in bilingual settings is limited, yet reviews of extant research point to several studies that draw a compelling link between native language literacy instruction for adults and increased English language acquisition (Adams & Burt, 2000; Condelli & Wrigley et al., 2003). For the growing population of immigrant adults who come to the U.S. with no prior schooling or less than six years' of education, this knowledge base is critical. The extremely limited body of research that exists on adult ESL learners draws a positive correlation between literacy acquired in the native language (be it prior to English language learning or in conjunction with it) and attainment of literacy skills and proficiency in English (Condelli & Wrigley, 2005).

Use of the native language in instruction for low-literate adults

The use of the native language in English as a Second Language Education for adults fills an important methodological gap. Research indicates that we need to learn literacy but once –

and that the skills then transfer to other languages. For learners with limited or no literacy in their native language, effective approaches fall into three main categories – Basic Education in the Native Language (BENL), bilingual instruction (often with literacy development in the native language and an emphasis on development of oral skills in English); and ESL instruction with native language supports (Condelli and Wrigley, 2003).

Blanca, who had completed only two years of formal schooling in her native El Salvador, struggled in ESL classes with little evidence of progress. Meanwhile, her peers with university degrees and professional training sailed through and made significant progress on each semester's reading and writing post-tests. Research that compares students' academic proficiency through assessments finds a significant link between reading and writing skills in the native language and test scores in English (Garcia-Vazquez et al., 1997). Several large-scale longitudinal studies on students in K-12 settings have demonstrated that longer exposure to the native language while instruction continues in the target language increases the long-term academic outcomes for students (Thomas and Collier, 2003; Ramirez et al, 1991). Though a focus for adult learners in English as a Second Language classes has been on "survival English" and the rapid acquisition of spoken English to manage daily affairs, research on both language minority and English dominant groups underscores the importance of literacy and academic skills for adults to improve their status in the workplace and be better able to participate fully in civic affairs (Cortina & Gendreau, 2003; Rivera-Batiz, 2003). Condelli, Wrigley and Yoon (2008) provide some evidence as to the benefits of native language use with low literate ESL learners, indicating positive gains in reading and oral English communication skills for students whose teachers used the native language for purposes such as to clarify concepts, introduce new ideas, or provide explanations.

K-12 and adult literacy education policies should be viewed in tandem, as many immigrant students enrolled in adult ESL programs have children in the school system. In addition, increasing numbers of English Language Learners at the middle and high school level are either counseled or pushed out of school and referred to and end up in adult education programs to obtain their GED or improve their English (Gotbaum & Advocates for Children, 2002) Thus the educational context of K-12 is highly relevant for adult literacy programs. Recent reports indicate that only publicly funded ESL programs have space for only about 5% of eligible immigrant adults (Center for an Urban Future, 2006). Adult ESL programs serve a diverse array of immigrant students, including young adults, parents, and senior citizens. These students may be formally educated, with post-secondary degrees up through the doctoral level; have only a few years of primary school; have never attended school; have attended and dropped out (or been counseled out) of high school in the U.S. or in their native country; or be immigrant youth who entered the U.S. at school age but chose never to enroll in school.

For young adult and adult students who come to the classroom having developed grade-level academic and literacy skills in their first language with strong formal academic training or professional skills, success in ESL is not far off. The challenge arises with the other groups of adult learners listed above, those who have never attended school and nor developed literacy skills in their native language (this includes students with strong oral skills in languages without written alphabets) and students who have interrupted schooling and may have weak literacy skills and gaps in content area knowledge (Burt & Peyton, 2003; Rivera, 1990). With her limited schooling, ESL class for Blanca was a struggle at multiple levels. Her classroom experiences were limited, other than visiting with her children's teacher or volunteering for school activities. Despite rich and varied life experiences, she needed to begin to learn classroom norms and

behaviors, teacher expectations, how to use a book, how to hold a pencil, how to write the alphabet, letters-sound correspondence, etc. When teaching Blanca and students like her, the adult education task in ESL goes far beyond teaching English, and includes fostering development of literacy skills, modeling and transmitting classroom behaviors and teacher expectations, and helping students overcome the affective challenges (Comings, 2000) and negative beliefs like "*soy boba*" (I'm dumb) and "*no puedo*" (I can't do it). Teaching literacy alongside English to 25 students with varying educational backgrounds from multiple language groups is a challenge for which many ESL teachers are not prepared, and students like Blanca drop out, frustrated by repeated experiences of making minimal progress.

With limited resources serving only a fraction of students, it makes sense to design programs based on students' needs so that learners persist until they can make progress. Positive correlations have been shown between gains in reading and oral English communication for students whose teachers provided native language supports, such as explanations, clarifications to enhance instruction (Condelli, Wrigley et al., 2003). With an emphasis on English-only, our classroom practices discount research and our programs are designed so that many students fall through the cracks. Wrigley underscores the bilingual nature of many immigrant communities and "the need for services that reflect the bilingual, bicultural nature of life and work" in communities with large concentrations of immigrants from one language group (Wrigley, 2007).

Rigid interpretations of federal policies and a short-sighted focus on English as a sole outcome have hampered many programs' abilities to adequately serve students who could benefit from basic education in their native language either prior to or in parallel with ESL. Federal and state funding for adult education requires that student gains be demonstrated exclusively in English (with the exception of the attainment of the GED, which is valid regardless of the

language of the test). Students' progress within native language literacy (BENL or Basic Education in the Native Language) or Spanish GED course falls into the category of "not measurable" and cannot be documented to demonstrate student growth. As a result, publicly-funded programs tend to shy away from native language or bilingual programs for adults. Adult literacy programs seeking to provide basic literacy in languages other than English must seek private funding or use volunteer teachers.

English Language Learners in ESL make up nearly half of the population of adults served in publicly-funded literacy programs in the U.S. Among those, nearly 80% are native Spanish-speakers (NCES, 2003). Development of effective models for such a large subgroup is not meant to exclude other groups; successful models can be adapted and replicated with other populations. New York City and the surrounding regions continue to experience high rates of immigration of native Spanish speakers from Mexico, the Caribbean, Central and South America. Other areas in the South and Midwest are experiencing a large influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America for the first time ever. Some of the largest and fastest growing groups of newcomers are populations characterized by limited formal education and the resulting high rates of poverty. In New York City alone, more than 40% of Mexican immigrants and 25% of the city's Dominicans have less than an 8th grade education, making their literacy levels and workforce skills well below those needed for even modest-paying jobs with growth potential. Data on poverty and household income in New York City show 33% of Mexican households and more than 40% of Dominican households below the poverty level. (Cortina, 2003).

In New York City, some adult literacy programs are directly addressing the challenges faced by immigrant students with limited native language literacy. Working with a network of local adult and youth literacy education programs and some alternative high schools, the New

York State Spanish Bilingual Education Technical Assistance Center at the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University is working to support local programs as part of a bi-national partnership with the Mexican government called *Plazas Comunitarias*. Adult and youth education programs are using private and public funding, in addition to volunteers, to provide classes in literacy in Spanish, basic education in Spanish (BENL), and pre-GED and GED in Spanish, alongside ESL classes and other comprehensive services like counseling, job development, legal services, and parent education. The resources are helping programs not only expand their native language literacy services, and re-start native language Spanish programs for adults that had closed down due to funding cuts, but also to launch new services and programs to address the specific needs of their local populations.

At Little Sisters of the Assumption, a community-based social service provider in Manhattan's *El Barrio*, now home to a large concentration of new Mexican immigrants, students in the *Plazas Comunitarias* program enter basic literacy classes in Spanish and computer-enhanced instruction from the very start, with those who have never been to school painstakingly learning the alphabet using *generative words*, learn to decode simple texts, write autobiographies, learn basic math and how to navigate common forms, before moving on to ESL. At the Staten Island Jewish Community Center, classes for parents located at several elementary schools have enabled students to attend class two days a week, one day for ESL in a bilingual environment with a Spanish-speaking teacher, and one day in Spanish to develop literacy, math, science, language arts and literacy. Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation (NMIC) in Washington Heights expanded BENL/ESL classes in September 2006 and pre-GED in Spanish because the need is growing. Lutheran Family Health Services in Sunset Park is currently running a BENL/ESL hybrid class with great success. The group

Unidad de Voluntarios para la Educación de Adultos (UVEA, the Union of Volunteers for Adult Education) is a widespread volunteer network of Latino immigrant adults who coordinate and teach literacy and basic education classes in Spanish every day of the week at four sites for hundreds of students each year. Growing need is reflected in expanding classes and increased referrals across programs and from student to student, high retention rates, committed and culturally sensitive administrators, teachers, and volunteers, and vocal student enthusiasm. Participation rates are above average for adult literacy, where low-level classes often start with 10 students and end with two, many *Plazas* programs are packed with more than 20 students multiple days per week. Research on hometown associations and other ethnic community service providers has demonstrated that many ethnic clubs and native language service providers provide culturally responsive, integrated services in the native language, and are a vital resource for “immigrant integration and economic development” (Somerville *et al*, 2008).

For students like Blanca with limited formal education in their native language, a strict adherence to an English-only policy in the adult education setting often means failure. According to John Lyons, Director of Adult Education at Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, "we made the decision to run BENL (Basic Education in the Native Language) / ESL bilingual programs with the knowledge that the un-reportable BENL outcomes lower our total gain and could negatively affect our future funding." Yet with clear student progress, his program has chosen to provide the necessary services nonetheless.

"When students who can't read or write enter ESL classes with no preparation, without taking classes in basic education in Spanish first, they crash and burn. I've seen it so many times. The same students who take Spanish and then start ESL stay with us, and we see a huge difference," says Flor de Maria Eilets, Director of Community Life at Little Sisters of the

Assumption Family Health Services (personal communication, March 7, 2006). Blanca and students like her may fall through the cracks before programs realize it, dropping out even before the 12 instructional hour threshold when they are counted according to federal guidelines. A student attending an ESL/Spanish literacy class at Staten Island Jewish Community Center after many prior unsuccessful experiences in ESL said, “I had tried to take English classes and I never made any progress. I got really frustrated, since I could never write down what was on the board. I didn't understand anything. So I quit.”² (Interview, February 12, 2006). A student who had dropped out of several English-only ESL classes prior to coming to basic literacy in Spanish, underscored the importance of a bilingual model this way: “Now the teacher can explain to us if we get confused and we can clarify and she explains things to us.”³ (Interview, March 4, 2006). Juan Castillo, founder of UVEA, states “think of a young man at 23 who has completed only 1 or 2 years of schooling and is here in the U.S. How many years has it been since he went to school? Returning to school after 12 years or more means learning the letters, learning how to hold a pencil, and learning English at the same time. It's just too much” (Taranto et al, 2008).

Deborah Salmon, a licensed psychologist who coordinates native language services at Staten Island Jewish Community Center, equates providing services in the native language to “turning around the trauma of displacement that immigrants face at leaving their countries and facing an unfamiliar and unwelcoming environment” (personal communication, August 12, 2007). Classes in her program regularly report above 90% attendance, a rarity in adult basic education. Students who need native language support and literacy training and enter ESL without first learning to read and write in their native language simply are not successful, and it makes little sense to reinforce students' sense of their own failure when there are ways to design programs to support their success.

Guadalupe Martínez, who coordinates and teaches the introduction to computers, literacy, and basic education in Spanish classes at Little Sisters of the Assumption, has seen remarkable progress over the past several years among women who had never had the opportunity to attend school because of family situations, poverty, and a variety of circumstances. The changes she reports go beyond improvements in basic skills, but represent a change in students' perception of themselves, how their families view them, and their own self-efficacy. Each year at the Spanish literacy graduation ceremony, teary-eyed proud women come to Ms. Martinez reporting newly high aspirations, like GED attainment, starting their own business, attending post-secondary, a major leap for students who started class unable to write their names or read street signs. These same adult students, with multiple family obligations, children, jobs, and economic challenges, dedicate countless hours to attending class and doing homework until they are able to read, write and attain a level of literacy at which they feel they can function independently. Their efforts may take up to three years, a huge commitment for women with many competing priorities.

Although parents with limited formal education can encourage their children and support them emotionally, they often lack the formally learned skills to provide specific hands-on assistance with homework and other academic tasks. "When my daughter started school two years ago, I didn't even know the alphabet. I asked the teacher if she could give us Spanish classes after school, and I kept after her again and again, asking. Until one day she finally told me classes would begin." (Interview, March 4, 2006). One UVEA student explained how important these services have been, "because in kindergarten it was fairly easy to help my daughter but now that she is in first grade, I'm having a hard time." (Taranto et al, 2008).

Conclusion

It cannot be ignored that across the U.S., many immigrant adults are successful in

traditional adult ESL settings. Yet we must be mindful of the needs of the growing group of adult immigrants who are not well-served by English-only approaches and are at risk of being marginalized by limited literacy and interrupted education in their native language. For them, effective programs provide a combination of high-quality resources in the native language, ESL instruction, trained bilingual teachers, instructional technology, and culturally-responsive and committed volunteers. Programs around the country that use native language literacy as a stepping stone to the success and advancement of adult learners are drawing upon the still limited research on adult ESL and bi-literacy to meet students' needs with research-based classroom practices. High rates of attendance and student persistence, skill gains and student self-report indicate that these programs fill an important gap in services. In native language literacy classes, bilingual/ESL hybrids, and Spanish GED, adult learners are experiencing great success. Some programs report retention rates of nearly 95%, with students at the lower levels persisting much longer than in traditional low-level ESL classes. The connection among research, practice and outcomes underscores the importance of these services for a growing number of adult students who are workers, parents, and community members, sometimes with life-changing results. Hopefully, data and documentation from the success of these models, along with much-needed further research on ESL literacy level students will add to the pool of evidence-based practices in adult basic education; impact educational policy; and increase the political will to address students' needs directly rather than succumb to widespread anti-immigrant sentiments. Maribel, a student at the Staten Island JCC, expressed it perhaps best: "Thank you for thinking of us with these classes. We thought they had forgotten us." ⁴ (Interview, March 4 2006).

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¹ Various types of bilingual programs are implemented in K-12 settings, each with slightly different goals. ESL programs provide instruction in English all the time using methodology specifically designed to help students learn both language and content. Transitional bilingual (TBE) models include *early-exit* and *late-exit* models in which students receive decreasing amounts of instruction in their native language as their proficiency in English increases. Both ESL and TBE programs have the dual goals of English proficiency and grade-level content knowledge. Maintenance bilingual models, such as dual language or two-way immersion programs, use English and the native language year after year with three goals: bilingualism/bi-literacy, grade level content knowledge, and multicultural competency. Unfortunately, across the U.S. there exist poorly designed bilingual programs that do not follow a research-based model; there are also numerous examples of programs that are well-designed but poorly implemented. Lack of trained teachers with bilingual competency, quality materials in the minority language, administrative or community support and a lack of consistency all add to poor implementation. Unfortunately, some programs that call themselves bilingual have strayed so far from the research-based program models that their poor implementation has compromised the academic success of their students.

² "Yo había tratado de tomar clases de inglés pero no avancé y me frustré mucho, porque nunca podía apuntar lo que escribía la maestra en el pizarrón. No entendí nada. Y lo dejé."

³ "Ahora la maestra a veces nos explica en español y es mucho mejor – se puede aclarar y expresamos nuestras dudas y ella nos explica."

⁴ "Gracias por pensar en nosotros con estas clases. Pensamos que nos habían olvidado aquí."