

## **Lessons From Research: What Is the Length of Time it Takes Limited English Proficient Students to Acquire English and Succeed in an All-English Classroom?**

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### **Preface**

The American classroom landscape has changed dramatically over the past decade, in conjunction with increasing diversity among the nation's population. There is every indication that, in particular, student demographics and the make up of the teaching workforce will continue to change well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Three key developments appear to be of great concern to policy makers and school administrators at both state and local levels: 1) the growing number of students who arrive at school ill prepared to learn; 2) the growing number of non-native (foreign) born children and youth who enroll in schools across all grade levels; and 3) the large number of native and foreign-born students who are limited English proficient (LEP). Many of these students grow up speaking languages other than English at home; others grow up in multilingual households with English as one of the languages; and still others grow up speaking mostly English. Very few children from these households grow up speaking English fluently. None of them are proficient enough in English to participate fully in mainstream all-English classrooms; as a result, many of them fail to succeed in school and large numbers of them drop out. Further, a high proportion of these students live in high poverty neighborhoods and attend schools with high concentrations of other poor students, another cause of school failure. While some school

districts have addressed the above issues and the factors that place children and youth at risk of educational failure head on, there are many others that are still struggling in their efforts to serve these students equitably and effectively.

This document provides a brief overview of the results of recent research and data syntheses funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) on effective educational approaches that promote the acquisition of English language arts skills and grade-appropriate content for LEP students. This group, also known as English language learners (ELLs), is a prominent part of the broad population of at-risk young children and school-age youth.

The purpose of this document is to inform policy makers and educators of the results of key education research that have implications for: the design of educational programs and assessments for LEP and other students placed at risk of educational failure; program placement decisions; and setting program participation time frames. This information is especially timely, given the number of state legislatures and local school districts engaged in systemic educational reform efforts — efforts expected to include English language learners at all levels of language proficiency.

Two of the many issues related to the education of LEP students are highlighted: the amount of time that LEP students are permitted to receive special support, and the language of instruction.



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**The amount of time that LEP students are permitted to receive language support services or remain in alternative educational programs.**

Many types of programs and services have been designed to help LEP students acquire English language skills and to prepare them to participate on par with their English proficient peers in mainstream all-English classrooms. Some state legislatures, on the other hand, have instituted policies that dictate the amount of time an LEP student will receive language support services or participate in bilingual education or English as a second language (ESL) programs — the rationale being that LEP students should not be taught in their native language for long periods of time, that they should be able to acquire English in a short period of time, and that they need to be integrated into mainstream classrooms as soon as possible. California, Colorado and Massachusetts, for example, establish limitations on the time that an LEP student can receive special language support services. They do, on the other hand, permit waivers to extend the length of time a student can receive these services. Recently enacted educational policy in California limits sheltered English classes for LEP students to one year. After this period of time, such students are to be mainstreamed into all-English classrooms. Waivers for longer stays in classrooms that provide instruction geared to LEP students are available upon parental request, but it is incumbent upon the parent to know how and when to secure the waiver for services that will help the student learn the English language skills needed to succeed in school!

A parallel control on the amount of time that LEP students can receive language support services are state policies that dictate the conditions under which particular students may be exempted from taking state-mandated proficiency assessments in English. In Ohio, for example, students with limited English proficiency may be waived from taking state-mandated assessments for two years; however, high school students who are LEP are required to pass state tests in English in order to graduate. In Oklahoma, similar poli-

cies are in effect. LEP students may remain in a bilingual education program for up to three years, but must then take state-mandated assessments in English. The opportunity to learn English, of course, is influenced by the scope and content of language support services provided to LEP students, the length of time that the services are provided, and who provides the services.

Regrettably, decisions regarding the length of time a student is to receive special support services are made regardless of the characteristics and learning needs of individual students. The evidence also indicates such an important decision is rarely based on the progress that LEP students have made (as measured by valid assessments) in the acquisition of English language skills and grade-appropriate subject matter. Thus, the efficacy of these policies and practices is questionable.

**The language of instruction for LEP students.** There is no state-level legislation that explicitly prohibits the use of a non-English language for instructing LEP students. Further, across many states and schools, bilingual paraprofessionals or parents may assist teachers who have LEP students in their classrooms. The practice enables mainstream teachers to deliver instruction mostly, if not solely, in English. Bilingual teacher assistants, for example, might help LEP students by explaining the lessons delivered in English by the mainstream teacher to the whole classroom, or might tutor an LEP student on a particular task. Unfortunately, such language supports are not equitably distributed across schools or grades. For example, the research evidence indicates that classroom assistance of this type is rare in middle and high schools. More bad news is that a growing number of states and local schools have enacted policies that restrict the use of native or non-English languages for instructional support purposes, regardless of who delivers instruction.

Education policies and practices are implicitly linked to testing policies. That is, heterogeneous

groups and sub-groups of LEP students are expected to acquire English, study and learn subject matter in English, and take state, teacher, and nationally standardized assessments in English as soon as possible. One consequence is that school officials are generally inclined to immerse these students exclusively in English, irrespective of an LEP student's readiness to learn exclusively in English or readiness to acquire subject matter. The policies would appear to have the most egregious consequences for teen-age youth who arrive in this country speaking little English and enroll in middle and high schools where language support services are not readily available. Even when they are, rare is the case that such critical services are of high quality, of adequate duration to have any effect, or geared to help these students learn the higher-level subject matter that is the norm in the typical middle and high school.

Such policies would also seem to be in conflict with key findings from the research literature that support the effective role of a student's native language in learning in general and learning language arts skills and core content in particular, while also learning English.

The research described in this document highlights four lessons on effective educational strategies that promote the acquisition of English for LEP students in timely, albeit varied, time frames. The lessons stem from the research and data analysis initiatives funded by the U.S. Department of Education. It is hoped that the issues raised will lead to comprehensive and sensitive discussions on the most promising approaches to helping LEP students learn English effectively and efficiently and achieve academically to their full potential.

## Introduction

Every child is born with an innate ability to acquire language. Yet, whether it is the child's first or second language, there is no pre-determined or fixed time frame for language acquisition. Neither is there a fixed period of time for learning a

second language at home or in school, and learning to use it for academic purposes. Further, the research evidence strongly supports the proposition that the acquisition of second language arts for children, youth and adults who are termed limited English proficient (LEP) is tempered by many inter-related factors, including full access to a high quality education.

Where the literature posits an apparently fixed time frame for learning English for the whole group of these second language learners, it is based on an average length of time. But averages mask very real variability in students' abilities, motivations, readiness, and opportunities to become sufficiently proficient in English to effectively succeed in mainstream all-English classrooms. Depending on home and schooling conditions, an individual LEP student might acquire English to native-like proficiency levels in 1 to 3 years. Another LEP student might take from 6 to 10 years to gain such proficiency. Collectively, the two students might take an average of 3.5 years to 6.5 years! Proficiency in this case includes the high levels of academic English necessary for learning core subject matter at grade level and for demonstrating this knowledge.

**Variability among the population of LEP children and youth.** There is no typical LEP child. The literature reveals much variability within the population of children and school-age youth who are categorized as LEP. One factor that illustrates their heterogeneity is where they were born — some are foreign-born and others are native-born Americans (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation).

**Foreign-born status.** Approximately 45% of the current LEP school-aged population is foreign born. Some are recent immigrants who grew up speaking a non-English language at home. Often, their parents immigrate to the United States while these children are very young. Others arrive at school as teenagers and young adults.

**Formal schooling in native country.** An additional factor to consider is the growing number of

immigrant students who have had limited educational experiences in their native countries; consequently, many arrive at school ill prepared to learn. Other LEP youth and children arrive at school with transcripts that reveal extensive schooling experiences in their native countries, that imply high levels of native language skills, and that suggest at least an acquaintance with English. But, depending on their age of arrival, even these advantaged LEP students have to face the difficult transition to new school settings and schooling routines that many native-born students already know. Immigrant students also face a new language of instruction — English — as well as coursework that can be very different from what they studied in their native countries. Further, their arrival at school in this country is difficult for them and for the receiving schools to predict. They may or may not be ready to enroll in school at the beginning of the typical United States school year (August and September).

**Native-born status.** Approximately 55% of school-age LEP students are born in the US. Like their foreign-born peers, they are unevenly distributed across geographic areas and schools, and within school districts. For example, the highest concentration of LEP and non-LEP language minorities, including Hispanics, Asians and American Indians, are found in the West and the Northeast. Further, Asians and Hispanics are more likely to live in central cities of metropolitan areas.

**Range of monolingual and bilingual abilities.** Depending on the characteristics of their households, some of the native-born LEP students enter school speaking a non-English language. Others in this group are monolingual English speakers, but they are apt to speak distinct social dialects of English that are influenced by their cultural backgrounds, by their poverty, and by the non-English language(s) spoken by adults at home or in the surrounding community. As a result, their dialect of English might not sufficiently complement the academic dialect(s) they encounter in school. Many of these children

and youth arrive at school with poorly developed literacy skills in either their native language or English or both languages. In short, many native-born language minority students are limited English proficient, although not in the same ways or to the same degree that their foreign-born peers are. Still, the likelihood that both of these sub-groups of students will encounter an array of demanding and novel social, academic, and linguistic situations at school is great.

However extensive their differences, though, the population of these students shares the following features:

**Limited language proficiency.** The research and assessment evidence indicates that LEP students exhibit lower levels of skills in all four English language arts domains (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in relation to their typical English proficient peers.

**Inadequate preparation to start school ready to learn.** LEP students may start school with severe disadvantages. For example, they are less likely to have the early pre-reading supports that their middle class peers normally receive at home from their parents and siblings (e.g., being read to aloud, using educational games and toys, inventing stories and rhymes). Further, many LEP students do not have access to formal pre-school experiences. The research evidence supports the assertion that when students are not provided with high quality day care and early childhood services, once in school, their academic achievement and limited language proficiencies get cumulatively worse over time, over grade levels, and across all subject matter. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to participate in school as equal learning partners with their more advantaged and typical English proficient peers.

**Their poverty status.** Many LEP children and youth live in households and neighborhoods with high and sustained poverty — sometimes over several generations. For some, getting to and from school safely is a daily trial. Receiving regu-

lar and nutritious meals is an equally daunting struggle. Often LEP students attend schools with other poor children, whether they are in rural areas or inner cities. Unfortunately, the research literature supports the assertion that schools with high concentrations of poor students tend to be poorly maintained, structurally unsound, fiscally under-funded, and staffed with large numbers of minimally prepared and unlicensed staff. Further, their families are likely to move at least once during the school year from one school to another within the same school district, if not to another school district, thus further disrupting their already fragile educational opportunities.

To compound the social and schooling problems of these students, their teachers tend to focus mostly on basic skills and repetitive drills, rather than on high level content, language and comprehension skills that help students build on what they know. The research literature strongly suggests that lower order skills are less likely to hold students' attention, motivate them to learn, and guide them to use lessons learned across multiple subjects. The research literature also reveals that schools with large numbers of poor students have limited access to educational technologies, and that their teachers are more likely to use technologies to drill and teach basic rather than higher order skills. Furthermore, the research literature indicates that few teachers of at risk students engage them in modeling and simulation exercises carried out in cooperative learning settings, approaches that have shown to be effective.

In addition, the schools that these students attend (mostly high poverty schools) offer limited or no early childhood and preschool programs. Few of them offer comprehensive health and social services to students or their families. Further, the communities in which these schools are located do not generally support the development of high levels of literacy (in English or the non-English language used in the community) or build on the non-English language and cultural resources of the students, parents and other adults.

The probabilities are high that most of the LEP students in these schools will be exposed to a broad array of other significant factors that place them at risk of educational failure throughout their preschool, elementary and high school years. Most of the risk factors, moreover, have a relative, but negative, impact on each LEP student's readiness to learn in general; to learn English in particular; to learn grade-appropriate subject matter; to stay in school; and to go on to college and secure meaningful careers. These students represent a schooling dilemma of national proportions.

The research literature on teaching and learning strongly establishes that all learners are diverse in many respects and that the attainment of high levels of language arts skills — especially literacy skills — requires the long-term and consistent attention of the school, the teacher, the learner, the parent, and the larger community. It also supports the belief that models of foreign language teaching and learning for adults do not easily apply to children and youth, especially to at-risk LEP children and youth. In circumstances where school-aged learners are highly proficient in their first or native language (e.g., English or Spanish), these students are most likely to acquire a foreign or second language with relative ease and in short periods of time. But, the acquisition of English (second) language arts skills, especially reading, is a hard struggle for the majority of LEP students. Students whose native language arts skills are not adequately developed by the time they enter school and are not developed and used while in school would appear to face almost insurmountable odds to succeed.

There is every reason to be concerned about the needs of LEP students, to help them learn English and subject matter as effectively and efficiently as possible and on par with their English proficient peers. The consideration of appropriate educational theory and the systemwide implementation of research-based practice should be one of the first steps taken toward meeting this goal. Given that education



policies are the domains of state education agencies and local school districts, the burden of developing and assertively implementing sound policies and practices that ensure each LEP student's success in school rests on those agencies.

The next section highlights four lessons or insights regarding effective teaching and learning for students in general and in particular for LEP students engaged in the process of acquiring English. The lessons represent a distillation of developments in the sub-fields of second language acquisition and effective pedagogy for culturally diverse children and youth over the past several decades.

## **Four Research-based Lessons On How Long It Takes LEP Students To Learn English**

Research and data analysis initiatives funded by the U.S. Department of Education and others support the premise that limited English proficient children and youth can be taught and do learn English language arts and age- and grade-appropriate core content in timely, although varied, time frames. The literature also strongly supports the assertion that these students are successful when school officials and teachers make consistent use of effective educational approaches that are aligned to state curriculum standards and assessments. Accordingly, the research highlighted in this document reveals four inter-related lessons that promote the effective acquisition of English for LEP students.

*Lesson 1: Educational services are tailored to the unique linguistic, cultural, and familial characteristics, and the academic learning needs of each LEP student.*

This lesson means that teachers and others who teach LEP students play a key role in designing and providing the educational services needed. The services always include the same core subject matter content provided to the LEP student's English proficient peers. Tailored ser-

vices, moreover, make use of alternative instructional approaches such as native language instruction, sheltered English, English immersion, English as a second language, or any other research-based service designed especially for linguistically and culturally diverse children and youth who are limited English proficient. Further, the services might be provided in the mainstream or in a separate classroom or both. Also, they might be provided throughout the school day or for different amounts of time, as needed. The principal features of the tailored services are: 1) they stem directly from the results of authentic assessments of what the student knows and demonstrates and the progress being made, and 2) they represent the integration of higher order language arts skills and grade- and age-appropriate core academic content. The above presupposes that the teachers of these students, including tutors and teacher aides, are trained to ensure the expert coordination and delivery of needed services.

*Lesson 2: Consistent with Lesson 1, some LEP students are provided instruction in their native language on an as-needed basis, as the foundation for learning age- and grade-appropriate English language arts and for learning core academic content in English.*

This means that, depending on student profiles of accomplishments and need, teachers use their LEP students' native language resources for instructional purposes. Under certain circumstances, the teacher is proficient in at least one of the native languages represented in his/her classroom. Under all circumstances, the teacher is familiar with the key cultural and community features represented in the classroom. Further, effective teachers help LEP students make the transition from native language to English language use in natural and appropriately timed ways. These teachers, for example, help their LEP students realize the connection between native language literacy skills (e.g., reading and writing) and the acquisition of similar English

language literacy skills. Accordingly, teachers administer valid assessments in English and, when necessary, in the students' native language to reveal the students' levels of linguistic and academic proficiencies and achievement. They use this information to design the instructional approach(es) that best help each LEP student and the classroom as a whole to learn to high standards. The results of assessments are also used to monitor student progress over time, including across all of the core academic subjects.

*Lesson 3: Consistent with Lessons 1 and 2, teachers adjust instructional time to ensure the acquisition of the speaking and literacy skills that typical all-English classrooms require.*

This means that, depending on the subject matter being studied, the grade level, and student readiness, an LEP student might be taught fundamental and higher order language arts skills, including their corollary use in social classroom contexts within a prescribed period of time. Alternatively, another LEP student might require additional time and instruction to acquire acceptable levels of English proficiency and grade-specific content. Student readiness to learn English and in English might be negatively influenced by place or date of birth or native language proficiency. Effective teachers take such variables into consideration. This is especially the case for teaching grade-appropriate English language arts skills associated with subjects such as science, social studies, and higher order mathematics such as trigonometry and calculus. A similar caution applies to instruction in the student's native language and the optimal development of native language arts skills in classrooms where this goal underlies the instructional approach used by the teacher.

*Lesson 4: When not fully proficient in English, LEP students are taught in alternative programs or groups before being transitioned into mainstream all-English classrooms.*

This means that LEP students are targeted and placed in alternative classrooms or groups for special language arts instruction on the basis of their assessed needs, academic progress and progress made in learning English. This instruction might be all day or for parts of the school day. Equally important, the students are monitored with consistency to ensure that they are succeeding in comparison to or along with their English proficient peers. Also, the progress they make in the acquisition of English and subject matter in the mainstreamed all-English classroom is monitored after they exit their alternative programs. LEP students who exit alternative programs and fail to achieve to established high standards are provided with tailored language and core content services before, during and/or after school, during the summer, and for as long as they need such assistance.

The next section describes key Department-funded studies through which researchers have investigated first and second language acquisition and use in school and other contexts. The goal of the studies is to look very carefully at samples of LEP students in diverse classroom contexts, all of them engaged in learning English language arts and core subject matter. Collectively, the studies address the above lessons and provide evidence regarding effective pedagogy and other educational services that help LEP students to succeed in all-English classrooms and in the typical American school.

## Research Findings That Support The Four Lessons

The U.S. Department of Education funds research and development whose purpose is to investigate a wide range of teaching and learning issues and situations. Accordingly, the mission of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) is to fund and manage a national agenda of education research, development, and dissemination initiatives whose results will inform educators and guide them to improve schools and schooling. The studies referenced below are an example of this work. Each has investigated at least one aspect of the issues discussed in this document. The studies, moreover, share a common feature: that all LEP students can learn to the same high standards applied to their English proficient peers. Another shared feature is the utility of their results to inform policy regarding the length of time that LEP students (might) typically take to learn English and grade-appropriate subject matter successfully.

August, D., & Hakuta, K. (1997). *Improving schooling for language minority children: A research agenda*. Washington, DC: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, National Academy Press.

### *Key Findings*

“An important dimension is the age and concomitant cognitive skills of the second language learner...older children acquire a second language at a more rapid rate than younger children. (But) the degree of children’s native language proficiency is a strong predictor of their English language development. Evidence from preschool programs...suggests that use of the child’s native language does not impede the acquisition of English” (p. 28).

“The most striking fact about second language learning, especially as compared with first language learning, is the variability in outcomes.

Many individual and group variables explain success or failure in second language acquisition” (p. 37).

“In terms of English language learners, there is considerable variability among ethnic or language groups in home literacy practices...Literacy assessments alone are not adequate measures for (student) understanding (of) specific subject matter knowledge; certain disciplines may lend themselves more easily (for LEP students) to the transfer of knowledge across languages...” (p. 52).

“The central problem in assessing English language learners is their limited ability to perform on a test administered in English. Assessments based on translation into a second language have questionable validity” (p. 274).

### *About the Study*

The U.S. Department of Education funded this study and other private sponsors under the auspices of the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the Commission and Behavioral Sciences and Education of the National Research Council (NRC) and the Institute for Medicine. The established committee reviewed what is known about the linguistic, cognitive, and social processes involved in the education of English language learners (a.k.a. limited English proficient students); examined the knowledge base on effective educational programming for these students; and, made recommendations on the use of scientific evidence to inform policy and practice, among other charges. Further, the published volume builds on earlier NRC studies related to the topic. The body of knowledge reviewed and scholars interviewed represent the most exhaustive and scholarly investigation of the issues in this arena to date. The book is available from the NRC.



McLaughlin, B., & McLeod, B. (1996, June). Educating all our children: Improving education for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Impact Statement/Final Report on the Accomplishments of the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, submitted to the U.S. Department of Education.

#### *Key Findings*

“Language development programs in the exemplary schools (studied) were flexibly constructed to accommodate students with varying levels of fluency and, where appropriate, students from different language backgrounds. Rather than using a single model for all students with limited English proficiency, teachers adjusted curriculum, instruction, and the use of the (student’s/students’) primary language to meet varying needs of students” (p. 11).

“The transition from sheltered or primary language classes to mainstream classes was gradual, carefully planned, and supported with activities such as after-school tutoring to ensure students’ success...” (p. 12).

“Exemplary schools demonstrate the principles of optimal language acquisition. Children learn a language best — whether their first or second language — by using it to communicate rather than by studying it in isolation...to become competent in English...and develop mature literacy” (p. 12).

“Schools structured or extended the school day and year to...provide extra support for LEP students’ transition to English as well as for the incorporation of newcomers into the LEP program” (p. 20).

#### *About the Study*

*The Impact Statement on Practice and Knowledge* is one of several volumes that represent the culmination of a five-year award (1991-1996) to the University of California (UC), Santa Cruz by the U.S. Department of Education, OERI. The

mission of the referenced national research center was to conduct research on the education of language minority students and the relationship between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> language learning, among other topics. The results from the research projects conducted by Center scholars significantly advanced the knowledge base of effective teaching strategies that help children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds gain access to content material and acquire high literacy skills. The Impact Statement and related research and practice reports produced by Center officials are available online at: [www.ncbe.gwu.edu](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu)

Thomas, W. , & Collier, V. (1997, December). School effectiveness for language minority students. NCBE Resource Collection Series Number 9. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.

#### *Key Findings*

“L1 (native language) schooling has now been confirmed as a key variable in our (Thomas/ Collier) studies on the ‘how long’ question, as well as in many other researchers’ work (note: 17 studies are cited in report)...One more age group in our initial studies, those arriving after age 12 with good formal schooling in L1, were making steady gains with each year of school, but by the end of high school, they had run out of time to catch up academically to the native English speakers, who were continually pulling ahead...Students of all ages reached grade-level achievement in mathematics and language arts...in a shorter period of time, but required many years to reach grade level in reading, science, and social studies in English” (p. 36).

“(LEP) students being schooled all in English initially make dramatic gains in the early grades, whatever the type of program students (ESL, English Immersion, Sheltered English, etc.) receive, and this misleads teachers and administrators into assuming that the students are going to continue to do extremely well (in later grades)...Since

schools don't typically monitor the progress of these students in the mainstream (all-English classrooms), the schools do not detect the fact that these students typically fall behind the typical achievement levels of native English speakers by 1-4 NCEs each year, resulting in a very significant cumulative achievement gap of 15-26 NCEs by the end of their school years" (p. 38).

"...following these (LEP) students throughout their schooling, the bilingually schooled students are able to sustain the gains in L2 (English) and in some cases, to achieve even higher than typical native English speaker performance as they move through the secondary years of school...once they 'get there' (where 'there' is parity with comparable native English speakers of similar age on the school tests in English), they stay there, achieving on or above level in L2" (p. 40).

"...it takes typical bilingually schooled students, who are achieving on grade level in L1 (native language), from 4-7 years to make it to the 50th NCE in L2 (English). It takes typical 'advantaged' immigrants with 2-5 years of on-grade level home country schooling in L1 from 5-7 years to reach the 50th NCE in L2, when schooled all in L2 in the United States. It takes the typical young immigrant schooled all in L2 in the United States 7-10 years or more to reach the 50th NCE, and the majority of these students do not ever make it to the 50th NCE, unless they receive support for L1 academic and cognitive development at home" (p. 41).

[N.B.: The author's previous research established the benchmarks that support the above issues. Thus, in Collier, V. (1987). *Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes*, the author states that, "Immigrants of school age who must acquire a second language in the context of schooling need to develop full proficiency in all language domains, (including the structures and semantics of phonetics, phonology, inflectional morphology, syntax, vocabulary, discourse, pragmatics, and paralinguistics) and all language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and

writing, and metalinguistic knowledge of the language) for use in all the content areas (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies)" (p. 618).

"The data from this study (of the length of time required for 1548 advantaged limited English proficient students to become proficient in English for academic purposes)...imply that 5-, 6-, and 7-year old arrivals might acquire English for academic purposes more rapidly if they were provided a minimum of two years of continuing cognitive academic development in the L1 (native language)" (p. 637). "These findings show that there is no shortcut to the development of cognitive academic second language proficiency and to academic achievement in the second language. It is a process that takes a long, long time" (p. 638).]

#### *About the Study*

The referenced report represents the cumulative results of several studies conducted by the researchers over the past 10 years. Some phases were funded by the U.S. Department of Education, while private sponsors funded other phases. For example, in FY 1991, Dr. Collier was awarded a research grant under the OERI Field Initiated Studies Program. These funds enabled the researcher to develop and validate the data collection and analysis framework. The report is available online at: [www.ncbe.gwu.edu](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu)

The current phase of the study (Phase II, 1996-2001) of long-term linguistic and academic achievement of LEP students in alternative programs is part of the research agenda carried out by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) at UC, Santa Cruz. The researchers are collecting and analyzing student achievement data from schools that operate bilingual/ESL programs for LEP students in 26 school districts across the United States. A final report is expected in 2001.

Solomon, J., & Rhodes, N. (1995). *Conceptualizing academic language* (Research Report #15). Santa Cruz, CA: The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.

#### *Key Findings*

“There is general agreement among educators and researchers that the distinct type of English used in classrooms, referred to as academic language, is a variable that often hinders the academic achievement of some language minority students, even though such students might be proficient in varieties of English used in non-academic contexts” (p. 1).

“Academic language is the language of lecture and of textbooks. It is filled with expectations of prior knowledge and background and cultural uniformity. The vocabulary can be very technical and is topic-specific” (p. 9).

#### *About the Study*

This Research Report was issued by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning (NCRCDSSL) at UC, Santa Cruz. The U.S. Department of Education, OERI funded the Center. The mission of the referenced national research center was to conduct research on the education of language minority students and the relationship between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> language learning, among other topics. The purpose of the referenced research project was to investigate the role of academic language used in classrooms with students from diverse language backgrounds, including LEP students. Accordingly, the researchers’ findings emphasized the relationship between language and academic tasks, as evidenced in teacher/student interactions.

Collectively, the results from the research projects conducted by Center scholars significantly advanced the knowledge base on effective teaching strategies that help children from diverse

linguistic and cultural backgrounds gain access to content material and acquire high literacy skills. This and related research and educational practice reports produced by Center officials are available online at: [www.ncbe.gwu.edu](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu)

McLaughlin, B. (1992). *Myths and misconceptions about second language learning: What every teacher needs to unlearn* (Educational Practice Report #5). Santa Cruz, CA: The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.

#### *Key Findings*

“The evidence for the biological basis of the critical period (for learning language) has been challenged and the argument made that differences in the rate of second language acquisition may reflect psychological and social factors...that favor child learners... research comparing children and adults learning second languages as immigrants does not support the notion that younger children are more efficient at second language learning” (pp. 1-2).

“One of the implications of this line of research is that teachers should not expect miraculous results from children who are learning English as a second language in the classroom context” (p. 2).

“Furthermore, many researchers caution against withdrawing the support of the home language too soon. There is a great deal of evidence that, whereas oral communication skills in a second language may be acquired within two or three years, it may take up to four to six years to acquire the level of proficiency for understanding language in its instructional uses” (p. 5).

“The use of the home language in bilingual classrooms enables the (LEP) child to avoid falling behind in school work, and it also provides a mutually reinforcing bond between the home and the school...enabling them to participate more effectively in school activities while they are learning English” (p. 5).

“Often, teachers assume that once children can converse comfortably in English, they are in full control of the language. Yet for school-aged children, there is much more involved in learning a second language than learning how to speak it” (p.6).

“Many of the problems that children from minority language backgrounds have in reading and writing at the middle and high school levels stem from limitations in vocabulary and syntactic knowledge in the second language” (p. 6).

#### *About the Study*

This Educational Practice Report was issued by NCRCDSSL at UC, Santa Cruz. The purpose of this report was to discuss conventional or mistaken beliefs about a number of important issues in the area of second language learning. These include myths held by teachers on the ease and rapidity with which children learn a second language, the optimal age at which to begin second language instruction, the importance of the extent of exposure to the second language, the relationship between oral communication skills and academic language skills, and cultural and individual differences in language learning styles. The myths are explored on the basis of a review of the extensive research literature on second language acquisition. This and related research and educational practice reports produced by Center officials are available online at: [www.ncbe.gwu.edu](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu)

Nelson, B. (1996). *Learning English: How school reform fosters language acquisition and development for limited English proficient elementary school students* (Educational Practice Report #16). Santa Cruz, CA: The National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning.

#### *Key Findings*

“Each (exemplary) school (studied) exhibits a unique approach to assisting LEP students in learning English while also teaching them core

academic material. Schools have developed LEP programs in response to their specific demographic context, the preferences of parents, district and state policies...and the school’s vision for its educational program” (p. 7).

“At the four elementary schools...language arts development is considered as important for LEP students as English language acquisition...students are guided into developing the kind of advanced English literacy skills needed for academic success in middle and high school” (p. 10).

“Whether or not maintenance in the native language is sought, the exemplary schools (studied) vary in their approach to English language acquisition. All schools use students’ primary language — either as a means of developing literacy skills or as a tool for developing content, or both” (p. 15).

“In all cases where instruction is delivered using sheltered English, teachers are fluent in the language of their students. The transition to mainstream classes...is gradual, carefully planned, and supported with activities such as after-school tutoring to ensure students’ success at mastering complex content in English” (p. 15).

#### *About the Study*

This Educational Practice Report was issued by NCRCDSSL at UC, Santa Cruz. The purpose of this report was to describe the language arts programs at four exemplary elementary schools that successfully implemented language development activities for limited English proficient students. Schools were selected through a comprehensive nationwide search. The data collected included classroom observations, interviews with principals, site administrators, teachers, and focus groups with LEP students and their parents. The exemplary schools featured in the report demonstrated that LEP students learned challenging content in language arts while they also learned English. In order to accomplish this goal, the schools embarked on a process of restructuring, and

developed innovative curricular and instructional strategies and approaches.

Collectively, the results from the research projects and literature reviews conducted by Center scholars significantly advanced the knowledge base on effective teaching strategies that help children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds gain access to content material and acquire high literacy skills. This and related research and educational practice reports produced by Center officials are available online at: [www.ncbe.gwu.edu](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu)

Berman, P. (1997). *Studies of education reform: School reform and student diversity*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

#### *Key Findings*

“Teachers of LEP students should have the training and experience in language acquisition to assure that they can create and deliver the educational programs appropriate to the different developmental levels for their LEP students... Further, credentials for teachers who serve LEP students should also include fluency in a second language” (p. 7).

“Contrary to popular belief, researchers have discovered that young children do not learn a second language effortlessly, that they do not learn faster with more exposure to the new language, that their oral fluency outstrips their academic competence, and that they require many years to reach grade-level academic ability in the new language” (p. 17).

“Students of different ages and with different levels of native language literacy also learn a second language differently and at varying rates of speed. For example, immigrant students under age 12 who have had at least two years of education in their native country reach average achievement levels in 5 to 7 years, but young children with no native language schooling and students older than 12 facing academically chal-

lenging subject matter in a second language may take as long as 10 years to catch up” (p. 18).

#### *About the Study*

The U.S. Department of Education funded the referenced study through OERI (in 1990) to identify and describe exemplary school reform efforts involving the education of LEP students. The study focused on language arts education in grades 4 through 6 and mathematics and science education in grades 6 through 8. Further, the researchers examined how school reform initiatives affected the subject matter areas, as well as the entire curriculum and programs of instruction for LEP students. The referenced report includes the findings and conclusions. Volumes 1 and 2 describe findings across the eight study sites, as well as their implications for policy.

Snow, C. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Research Council, National Academy Press.

#### *Key Findings*

“If language minority children arrive at school with no proficiency in English but speaking a language for which there are instructional guides, learning materials, and locally available proficient teachers, then these children should be taught how to read in their native language while acquiring proficiency in spoken English, and then subsequently taught to extend their skills to reading in English” (p. 11).

“If language minority children arrive at schools with no proficiency in English but speak a language for which the above conditions cannot be met...the instructional priority should be to develop the children’s proficiency in spoken English...the postponement of formal reading instruction is appropriate until an adequate level of proficiency in spoken English has been achieved” (p. 11).



### *About the Study*

The study was undertaken with the assumption that empirical work in the field of reading had advanced sufficiently to allow substantial agreed-upon results and conclusions about the process of learning to read and effective instructional approaches that promote the acquisition of reading skills for all children. The book is available from the NRC.

Tharp, R. (1997). From at-risk to excellence: Research, theory, and principles for practice, (Research Report #1). University of California, Santa Cruz: Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence.

### *Key Findings*

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE)'s plan of work flows from eight basic premises. They are,

- All children can learn.
- All children learn best when challenged by high standards.
- English proficiency is a goal for all students.
- Bilingual proficiency is desirable for all students.
- Language and cultural diversity can be assets for teaching and learning.
- Teaching and learning must be accommodated to individuals.
- Schools that teach the skills that schools require can mitigate risk factors.
- Solutions to risk factors must be grounded in a valid general theory of developmental, teaching, and schooling processes" (pp. 2-4).

### *About the Study*

The referenced research report describes the conceptual and theoretical framework that guides the projects undertaken by CREDE researchers. CREDE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through OERI (1996-2003) to assist the nation's diverse students to achieve academic excellence. Central to its mission, CREDE's re-

search and development focus on critical issues in the education of linguistic and cultural minority students and students placed at risk of educational failure by factors of race, poverty, geographic location, and limited English proficiency. The report is available online at: [www.cal.org/crede](http://www.cal.org/crede)

## Additional Resources

For additional information on research and education statistics and activities related to the issues discussed in this document, please contact the National Institute on the Education of At Risk Students (NIEARS) at: [www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/at-risk](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/at-risk). NIEARS funds and manages a comprehensive program of research and development for the improvement of education for at-risk students.

The mission of NIEARS is to provide national leadership and support to expand research-based knowledge and strategies that promote excellence and equity in the education of children and youth placed at risk of educational failure. Federal legislation defines these students as those who, because of limited English proficiency, poverty, racial and ethnic affiliation or geographic location, face a greater risk of low educational achievement or reduced academic expectations than their advantaged peers. Toward this end, the Institute is committed to targeting its research and development efforts toward helping school officials and policy makers design and manage effective educational programs and services for these students and their families.

The Institute's extensive portfolio of activities includes three national research centers:

- Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) at: <http://scov.csos.jhu.edu/crespar>
- National Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) at: <http://www.cal.org/crede/>
- National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented at: <http://www.gifted.uconn.edu>

Information on research and development activities related to linguistically and culturally diverse students and funded by the U.S. Department of Education is also available through the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education at: <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu>

## About the Author

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# NCBE ISSUE BRIEFS

Other Issue Briefs address lessons from research on English language acquisition and instruction, bilingual education theory and practice, instructional technology, and critical issues in standards and assessment. The entire Issue Brief series is available online at [www.ncbe.gwu.edu](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu), or by contacting NCBE at the address listed below.

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