

THE TRANSATLANTIC TASK FORCE ON IMMIGRATION AND INTEGRATION

**LANGUAGE POLICIES AND PRACTICES
FOR HELPING IMMIGRANTS AND
SECOND-GENERATION STUDENTS
SUCCEED**

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September 2007

MPI and Bertelsmann Stiftung have convened a task force to promote thoughtful immigration policies and assess and respond to the profound challenges of integrating immigrants and building stronger communities on both sides of the Atlantic. It addresses its recommendations to European Union institutions and Member State governments, the governments of the United States and Canada, and state and local governments and civil society everywhere.

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Introduction

For many immigrants and children of immigrants, the language of instruction in schools and educational institutions is often different from the one spoken at home. These children may need extra support to master the language of instruction, which is a key to success in school. This brief looks at the various approaches that may help students' second-language learning.

We begin by examining the evidence on school achievement and how a lack of competence in the language of instruction affects the results of immigrant children. International data show that 15-year-old immigrant students who do not speak the language of instruction at home are, on average, one year behind nonimmigrant students. This gap in student outcomes hampers not only these students' educational attainment, but will also make it difficult for them to succeed in the labor market.

The paper draws on the results of a unique survey of school language policies and practices in 14 immigrant-receiving countries. The survey results provide insight on approaches that may help immigrant students gain proficiency in the language of instruction. Because of the limited research in this area, it is not possible to present a set of experimentally field-tested best practices. Instead, we provide some recommendations based on countries where there are only small differences in achievement between second-language learners and other students. These recommendations include making long-term investments in systematic language support programs, especially for countries that do not currently have such programs, and training teachers in second-language acquisition both through preservice and professional development programs.

Differences in Educational Outcomes

Children who do not speak, read, or write the language of instruction to the level of their peers perform less well in school.¹ For quantitative evidence of this difference, one of the best sources is the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA study, carried out under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). More than 40 countries participated in the PISA 2003 assessment, including 17 countries with sufficient numbers of immigrant students to conduct meaningful analyses for these groups.² The participating countries and regional entities were Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the

Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States, Hong Kong-China, Macao-China, and the Russian Federation.

The PISA results confirm the importance of learning the language of instruction for academic success. If we consider the average across OECD countries, immigrant students who speak the language of instruction at home are roughly a half-year of learning behind their nonimmigrant peers in mathematics, while immigrant students who do not speak the language of instruction at home are about a year behind.³ In other words, it is estimated that more than *half a grade level* separates immigrant students who do and who do not speak the language of instruction at home. Not surprisingly, these students are at an even greater disadvantage when it comes to reading.

Only two countries in the PISA study showed no significant differences between the performance of nonimmigrant students and immigrant students (first and second generation) who do not speak the language of instruction at home: Australia and Canada. Part of the reason for this is likely the more selective immigration policies in these two countries. We will consider other reasons below. In all other countries, immigrant students who do not speak the language of instruction at home face a significant disadvantage in school.

These large differences in performance suggest that students have insufficient opportunities to learn the language of instruction. Investment in language support measures will likely reduce the disadvantage in school achievement levels for immigrant students. If immigrants do not receive adequate support for learning the language, their integration in terms of school achievement, educational attainment, and future success in the labor market will be hampered.

The Role of Bilingual Language Support

The numerous ways of delivering language support need to be examined to provide policy direction about the best approach. But first we need to consider the distinction research has often focused on — whether teaching both the language used at home and the language of instruction best serves children.

Traditionally, the “interdependence hypothesis” dominated research on the effectiveness of language support.⁴ This hypothesis suggests that students will only be able to become proficient in a second language if they already have a good command of their first language. Although few people today maintain the strict version of this hypothesis, the assumption that first-language proficiency is

a crucial prerequisite for second-language acquisition is still widespread. However, the empirical support for this assumption is weak.

Several studies have explored the effectiveness of bilingual programs (mostly transitional bilingual programs). The evidence is ambiguous and the subject of considerable controversy.⁵ Some studies suggest that bilingual programs tend to be more effective than monolingual approaches. Yet, very few of these studies examine language programs for more than a year. More importantly, the quality of most of the evaluations is quite poor.⁶ In the majority of studies, the content and quality of the “English-only” treatment that students received in the control groups was not specified, making it difficult to interpret the benefits of the bilingual approaches the studies identified.

Helping students maintain and develop their bilingualism could be a worthwhile goal in its own right.⁷ The ability to communicate proficiently in more than one language could have valuable returns. For some students, bilingualism might open up additional opportunities for their educational and professional development and could improve their chances on the job market, although the evidence supporting this assumption is unclear.⁸ Keeping up their native language may also increase students’ social capital by helping to preserve and intensify their social ties with members of the immigrant community and with residents in the country of origin.⁹ One way to do this is by offering language classes to help immigrant students maintain their native language.

Overall, it is unclear whether bilingual approaches are more effective than monolingual approaches in helping immigrant children attain proficiency in the language of instruction. It is essential to determine whether comparable or higher levels of proficiency can be reached with high-quality immersion programs that include support specifically geared toward the needs of children learning the language of instruction.¹⁰ The available data suggest that transitional bilingual programs do not seem to hamper second-language learning, but students do not necessarily fare substantially better than in monolingual programs. In short, neither monolingual nor bilingual approaches to language support need be fundamental tenets of policy. Nevertheless, countries may choose to foster bilingualism as a way of strengthening human and social capital within the country.

Language Support in Countries with Small Achievement Gaps

We now turn to the question of which programs and policies are in place in countries where immigrant students succeed. To gain a better understanding of countries' approaches to helping immigrants attain proficiency in the language of instruction, we draw on an international survey we carried out in 2005 with PISA.¹¹

Fourteen countries completed the survey: Australia, Austria, Belgium (French community), Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. Four countries with federal structures — Australia, Austria, Canada, and Switzerland — provided information about a select number of their provincial or regional delivery systems.

The goal of the survey was to capture policies and practices that countries use for language support. While the survey focused on a range of practices from preprimary to adult language instruction, the focus here is on language policies and practices in primary and lower secondary school. We asked countries about five different types of language support:¹²

1. Immersion: These programs provide no specific language support: students are “immersed” in the language of instruction within mainstream classrooms.
2. Immersion with systematic language support: Students are taught in the mainstream classroom, but they receive specified periods of instruction aimed at increasing proficiency in the language of instruction over a period of time.
3. Immersion with a preparatory phase: Students participate in a preparatory program before making the transition to mainstream classes.
4. Transitional bilingual: Students initially learn in their native language before teaching gradually shifts to the language of instruction.
5. Maintenance bilingual: Students receive significant amounts of instruction in their native language; programs aim to develop proficiency both in the native and the second language.

The survey asked about the types of practices implemented, the intensity of the practices (i.e., hours per week), whether there were explicit curricula and

standards for the programs, and the percentage of second-language learners who received support. While the information is limited to program descriptions, the results provide some indication of features of effective language support programs.

Primary schools

In almost all of the countries studied, more than 50 percent of children in primary schools who are not fluent in the language of instruction participate in immersion with systematic language support. These students attend regular classes but may receive supplemental support either within regular classes or through additional periods of instruction aimed at improving skills in the language of instruction. The primary focus of the lessons is on language acquisition, including grammar, vocabulary, and communication, rather than on academic content, which is taught during the regular classes.

In addition, several countries offer immersion programs (with a preparatory phase) to newly arrived students at the primary-school level. This approach is common in Finland, the Australian state of Victoria, and Sweden. Only a few places (the French community of Belgium, Luxembourg, and Spain) use the unstructured immersion approach. Bilingual programs seem to play a minor role in most school systems. While some educational systems offer additional classes to sustain students' skills in the native language, programs rarely provide instruction in academic subjects using students' native languages. Most countries tend to leave it up to families or community groups to arrange native-language instruction for their children.

Secondary schools

The pattern is similar for secondary schools although immersion or immersion with a preparatory phase is more common in secondary school than in primary school.

The proportion of students in immersion programs without any language support is high in several places, especially in the French community of Belgium, Germany, and Luxembourg. Newly arrived immigrant students in these countries may receive very limited support in learning the language of instruction.

In contrast, intensive immersion programs with a preparatory phase are the most common approach for immigrant students in Australia (New South Wales and Victoria), Canada (British Columbia), the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Zurich). More than 20 percent of immigrant secondary students attend this type of program in Australia (Queensland), Finland, and Sweden. This percentage would likely be even higher if one considered only newly arrived immigrant students.

The preparatory phase is an intensive program focused on language development. These programs often provide an orientation to help students understand the receiving country's culture and its school system. Newly arrived immigrant students attend the program for a limited period of time (usually six to 12 months) before receiving regular school language support and enrolling in academic programs. The goal of such programs is to help students make the transition to mainstream instruction as quickly and successfully as possible. They seem to be more common in secondary schools, because newly arrived students need substantial language training to succeed in secondary school content courses.

Despite the broadly similar approaches to providing language support to second-language learners across the surveyed countries, the specific programs vary substantially, even those that may fit into the same program category. For example, among the two most common approaches (immersion with systematic language support and immersion with a preparatory phase), an explicit curriculum does not always exist. Less than half of the countries offering immersion with systematic language support have an explicit curriculum. The number is even smaller for immersion with a preparatory phase.

The programs also differ in a number of other ways, including in organization and intensity (in terms of hours per week). In addition, not all programs have explicit frameworks and standards for student progress. Since these variations make comparisons difficult, an alternative analytical approach is to look at countries that are more "successful."

"Successful" countries and subnational entities

In Australia and Canada, immigrant students (even those learning English) and nonimmigrant students have similar achievement levels. In Sweden, the achievement level between second-generation immigrant students and nonimmigrant students is smaller than the gap between first-generation

immigrant students and nonimmigrant students. In other words, it appears that students who spend their entire school career in Sweden perform substantially better. While this cannot be directly attributed to the language programs in place, the pattern may provide some indication for what practices may work more effectively. Furthermore, even though Australia and Canada have selective immigration policies, they also have structured language support in place. By contrast, the support is less systematic in some countries where immigrant populations may arguably need it more. Within Australia and Canada programs differ across states and provinces due to the federal education structure in each country. Particularly noteworthy programs can be found in the Australian state of Victoria and the Canadian province of British Columbia.

The programs in Australia-Victoria, Canada-British Columbia, and Sweden tend to have a number of factors in common. First, they have systematic programs with explicit standards and requirements in place. Second, they have curricula that may be determined at the local level but that are based on centrally developed key curriculum documents, including language development frameworks and progress benchmarks.

Third, there are high standards for the program so students acquire language skills in the context of the mainstream curriculum and can integrate into the appropriate level of instruction. Fourth, they have time-intensive programs. Fifth, their programs tend to offer continued support in both primary and lower secondary school. Sixth, their teachers who instruct second-language learners have received specialized training either during their initial studies or through in-service training. Some teachers have completed postgraduate degrees in teaching the language of instruction as a second language. Finally, their teachers of second-language learners tend to cooperate with class teachers to ensure they meet the needs of immigrant students.

“Less successful” countries

In countries with large differences in student performance, the language support programs tend to be less systematic. If programs exist, they may only be available at the primary level. For example, Germany, Luxembourg, and the French community of Belgium offer only very limited language support programs at the secondary level. Luxembourg and the French community of Belgium also do not provide language support at the primary level. In these two places, immigrant students receive little additional language support at either the primary or the secondary level. Less successful countries also tend not to have

explicit curriculum framework documents or certification programs for teaching second-language learners.

Conclusions

The survey results suggest that different countries' approaches to language support have a number of key characteristics in common. While the research debate has focused on the role of the first language for gaining proficiency in the second language, most countries offer monolingual programs that provide additional support for second-language learning. The most common approach in primary and secondary school is immersion with systematic language support.

It is not possible to establish the extent to which the different language support programs contribute to the relative achievement levels of immigrant students in the participating countries. However, the survey and PISA data indicate that some countries have relatively small achievement gaps between immigrant and native students, or smaller gaps for second-generation students compared to first-generation students. These countries tend to have long-standing language support programs with clearly defined goals and standards.

In contrast, in some countries where immigrant students perform at significantly lower levels than their native peers (e.g., Belgium and Germany), language support tends to be less systematic.¹³

Examples of Practices That Seem To Be Effective

The following examples, one from North America and one from Europe, offer insights into how language learning is organized in two contexts that seem to have positive outcomes for immigrant students who are learning the language of instruction.¹⁴

Canada – British Columbia

At the primary level in British Columbia, schools focus on immersion with systematic language support for immigrant students. Students receive up to six hours of language support a week. In order for schools to receive additional funds for supporting these programs, the Ministry of Education has a series of conditions:

1. An English-language assessment must confirm that students require additional support to succeed in the standard curriculum.
2. Schools must have an instruction plan developed with a teaching specialist to meet the needs of the student. The plan is subject to regular reviews.
3. Students must receive additional services, such as special instruction in language acquisition or writing, or in-class assistance.
4. Schools must provide supports to teachers to address the language needs of their students.
5. Schools must document service provision and record students' progress.

At the secondary level, new immigrants participate in preparatory programs before transitioning to mainstream instruction. The preparatory program involves three phases: the reception phase, the transition phase, and the integration phase.

In the reception phase, students receive extensive assistance in learning English. The program is composed of eight learning blocks with four to five blocks focused on learning English and supported learning of other subjects (e.g., English-as-a-second-language (ESL) reading, writing, conversation, social science, and science). The remaining blocks are content courses, such as mathematics.

In the transition phase, students take two language support classes (e.g., ESL language arts) and six grade-level content classes, such as mathematics and science.

Finally, in the integration phase, students take only one language support class and seven content courses. The curriculum guidelines for ESL define the principles for developing local curricula.

ESL teachers in British Columbia generally have specialized training either through preservice training, additional coursework at universities, or in-service training.

Sweden

Immigrant students who are not proficient in Swedish take Swedish as a second language (SSL) as a subject. The goal of SSL is to provide students with the language skills necessary to express complex ideas through speech and writing. SSL has an explicit curriculum, and the proficiency requirements for SSL are

similar to those for nonimmigrant Swedish students. In fact, SSL in secondary schools is equivalent to regular Swedish in terms of eligibility for postsecondary education.

According to education authorities, SSL teachers should have completed a specialization in teaching second-language learners. The number of instruction hours for SSL is the same as for mainstream Swedish courses. In addition, recent immigrants may attend a preparatory program that introduces them to the language and the school system. Depending on the individual student's progress, recent immigrants stay in these programs between six and 12 months. The preparatory programs are less developed than SSL in that they do not have frameworks or guidelines for the curriculum.

Obstacles to Implementation

The pattern of PISA results indicates that language support programs in Canada and Sweden may be effective. However, as with any new education reform, governments face obstacles in implementing such programs and practices in a substantial number of schools.

The biggest obstacle is quite simply that governments and schools must commit to systematic language support from kindergarten through secondary school. These programs must be a long-term investment and not a short-term reform. However, the programs remain necessary only as long as the country has a substantial number of second-language learners in its schools.

Policy Recommendations

Despite these obstacles, cross-country comparisons provide examples of models for language support that seem to be effective. The best practices that inform the three recommendations below are drawn from countries that have both a significant immigrant population and relatively small achievement differences between immigrant and nonimmigrant students.

1. Choose and invest in efficient, systematic, and effective models of language support at all education levels.
 - a. In many countries, providing bilingual education to immigrant students from all language groups in every school is an unrealistic goal. As a result, it is necessary to have high-quality monolingual

programs that support students in acquiring the language of instruction.

- b. A small number of approaches should be chosen and tested using adequate research designs. The most successful of these programs should be implemented systematically and further developed through careful evaluation.
 - c. Immersion with systematic language support seems to work if the programs are systematic with explicit standards and requirements in place (see below).
 - d. For new immigrants, especially those entering secondary school, intensive immersion programs with a preparatory phase and continuous language support may help to facilitate the best possible transition to mainstream instruction.
 - e. Language support programs should be available to students from preprimary through secondary school.
 - f. Countries may want to consider offering bilingual programs and heritage-language programs to foster multilingualism as a resource.
2. Ensure that the programs have guiding principles, goals and standards, and benchmarks for measuring progress.
 - a. Language support programs should have frameworks describing the guiding principles of the language support program to be implemented.
 - b. A sufficient amount of time should be dedicated to language support programs.
3. Train teachers in second-language acquisition.
 - a. Teachers who provide the language support should receive training in second-language acquisition that is aligned with the approaches implemented in practice. The most effective training will most likely cover implicit and explicit language support. Explicit language support requires that teachers have strong linguistic knowledge, so that they can effectively teach grammatical structures. They must also be aware of the language structures that present the main hurdles in second-language acquisition and how these can be overcome. This requires training teachers at universities through preservice training programs in this area and ensuring that the veteran teachers responsible for language support courses have adequate opportunities for professional development.
 - b. Classroom and language teachers should work in cooperation.

Further Reading

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ENDNOTES

1. OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life: First Results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000* (Paris: OECD, 2001).
2. OECD, *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003* (Paris: OECD, 2004).
3. P. Stanat and G. Christensen, *Where immigrant students succeed—a comparative review of performance and engagement in PISA 2003* (Paris: OECD, 2006).
4. J. Cummins, "Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children," *Review of Educational Research* 49, no. 2 (1979):222-251.
5. See for example J.P. Greene, "A meta-analysis of the Rossell and Baker review of bilingual education research," *Bilingual Research Journal* 21, no. 2 (1997):103-122; C.H. Rossell and K. Baker, "The educational effectiveness of bilingual education," *Research in the Teaching of English* 30, no. 1 (1996): 7-74; R.E. Slavin and A. Cheung, "A Synthesis of Research on Language of Reading Instruction for English Language Learners," *Review of Educational Research* 75, no. 2 (2005): 247-284; A.C. Willig, "A meta-analysis of selected studies on the effectiveness of bilingual education," *Review of Educational Research* 55, no. 3 (1985): 269-317.
6. C. Limbird and P. Stanat, "Sprachförderung bei Schülerinnen und Schülern mit Migrationshintergrund: Ansätze und ihre Wirksamkeit," in *Herkunftsbedingte Disparitäten im Bildungswesen: Differenzielle Bildungsprozesse und Probleme der Verteilungsgerechtigkeit*, J. Baumert, P. Stanat and R. Watermann, Eds. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005).
7. For example see A. Portes and L. Hao, "The schooling of children of immigrants: Contextual effects on the educational attainment of the second generation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* 101, no. 33 (2004):11920-11927.
8. K. Pendakur and R. Pendakur, "Language knowledge as human capital and ethnicity," *International Migration Review* 36, no. 1 (2002):147-177.
9. C. Bankston and M. Zhou, "Effects of minority-language literacy on the academic achievement of Vietnamese youth in New Orleans," *Sociology of Education* 68, no. 1(1995):1-17.
10. There is a need for further comparative research on high-quality immersion programs that include support specifically geared toward the needs of second-language learners. Research could examine whether similar types of programs work in different

settings and which aspects of the curriculum and teacher training are most effective. In addition, a more in-depth evaluation of "best practice" programs than the one presented below could provide further insights to the strengths of these programs.

11. See note 3.

12. Based on K. Hakuta, "The debate on bilingual education," *Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* 20, no. 1 (1999): 36-37.

13. It is worth noting that this situation is changing. In the past five years, several countries have introduced new programs aimed at supporting the learning of immigrant students. These programs may help reduce the achievement disadvantage of this group, especially if policymakers can encourage the development and evaluation of high-quality programs.

14. For more information, see note 3.

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