Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about the immersion and bilingual approach for literacy instruction when working with English Learners. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the ten regional educational laboratories (REL) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. It provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations on research based education questions.

The information below represents the most rigorous research available. Researchers consider the type of methodology and give priority to research reports that employ well described and thorough methods. The resources were also selected based on the date of the publication with a preference for research from the last ten years. Additional criteria for inclusion include the source and funder of the resource.

**Question:** Do research findings suggest we use an immersion or bilingual approach for literacy instruction for ELLs (ages 10-17) who are new arrivals?

**Search Process**

**Key words and search strings used in the search:** English Language Learners AND reading instruction AND immersion OR bilingual; new arrivals AND immersion literacy instruction OR bilingual literacy instruction; English Language Learners AND adolescent literacy; English Language Learners AND transitional

**Search databases and websites:**

2. JSTOR: [http://www.jstor.org/action/showAdvancedSearch](http://www.jstor.org/action/showAdvancedSearch)
3. Google Scholar: [www.google.com/scholar](http://www.google.com/scholar)

**Sample Citations Retrieved:**

**Upper Elementary and Middle School**


**Abstract/Summary:** The fastest-growing student population in U.S. schools today is children of immigrants, half of whom do not speak English fluently and are thus labeled English learners.
Although the federal government requires school districts to provide services to English learners, it offers states no policies to follow in identifying, assessing, placing, or instructing them. Margarita Calderon, Robert Slavin, and Marta Sanchez identify the elements of effective instruction and review a variety of successful program models. During 2007-08, more than 5.3 million English learners made up 10.6 percent of the nation's K-12 public school enrollment. Wide and persistent achievement disparities between these English learners and English-proficient students show clearly, say the authors, that schools must address the language, literacy, and academic needs of English learners more effectively. Researchers have fiercely debated the merits of bilingual and English-only reading instruction. In elementary schools, English learners commonly receive thirty minutes of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction but attend general education classes for the rest of the day, usually with teachers who are unprepared to teach them. Though English learners have strikingly diverse levels of skills, in high school they are typically lumped together, with one teacher to address their widely varying needs. These in-school factors contribute to the achievement disparities. Based on the studies presented here, Calderon, Slavin, and Sanchez assert that the quality of instruction is what matters most in educating English learners. They highlight comprehensive reform models, as well as individual components of these models: school structures and leadership; language and literacy instruction; integration of language, literacy, and content instruction in secondary schools; cooperative learning; professional development; parent and family support teams; tutoring; and monitoring implementation and outcomes. As larger numbers of English learners reach America's schools, K-12 general education teachers are discovering the need to learn how to teach these students. Schools must improve the skills of all educators through comprehensive professional development—an ambitious but necessary undertaking that requires appropriate funding.


Abstract/Summary: This review synthesizes research on English reading outcomes of all types of programs for Spanish-dominant English language learners (ELLs) in elementary schools. It is divided into two major sections. One focuses on studies of language of instruction and one on reading approaches for ELLs holding constant language of instruction. A total of 13 qualifying studies met the inclusion criteria for language of instruction. Though the overall findings indicate a positive effect (effect size = 0.21) in favor of bilingual education, the largest and longest term evaluations, including the only multiyear randomized evaluation of transitional bilingual education, did not find any differences in outcomes by the end of elementary school for children who were either taught in Spanish and transitioned to English or taught only in English. The review also identified whole-school and whole-class interventions with good evidence of effectiveness for ELLs, including Success for All, cooperative learning, Direct Instruction, and
ELLA. Programs that use phonetic small group or one-to-one tutoring have also shown positive effects for struggling ELL readers. What is in common across the most promising interventions is their use of extensive professional development, coaching, and cooperative learning. The findings support a conclusion increasingly being made by researchers and policymakers concerned with optimal outcomes for ELLs and other language minority students: Quality of instruction is more important than language of instruction.


**Abstract/Summary:** This article presents research that highlights the success of dual language education for student participants, both native English speakers and English language learners, from a variety of demographic backgrounds at both the elementary and secondary levels. However, there are a number of challenges that can impede the quality of implementation in dual language programs. This article identifies and discusses some of these important challenges facing dual language programs, including issues related to program design, accountability, curriculum and instruction related to biliteracy, and bilingual language development. In addition, implications for practice are presented to address some of these challenges.


**Abstract/Summary:** Reports on the development and evaluation of a transitional bilingual program for grades 2 through 5. Evaluation results based on achievement of 42 students and 42 comparisons show that the program is more effective than the transition program students typically receive. Discusses implications for education of English learners. (SLD)


**Abstract/Summary:** This article reports the outcomes of a multiyear study comparing the English and Spanish language and reading performance of Spanish-dominant children randomly assigned, beginning in kindergarten, to transitional bilingual education (TBE) or structured English immersion (SEI) for periods of up to 5 years. On the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and its Spanish equivalent (Test de Vocabulario en Imagenes Peabody) and on the English and
Spanish versions of three Woodcock Reading Scales, first graders in TBE performed significantly better in Spanish and worse in English than did their SEI counterparts. Differences diminished in second and third grades, and by fourth grade, when all students in TBE had transitioned to English-only instruction, there were no significant differences on English reading measures. These findings suggest that Spanish-dominant students learn to read in English equally well in TBE and SEI and that policy should therefore focus on the quality of instruction rather than on the language of instruction for English-language learners.


**Abstract/Summary:** This article reviews experimental studies comparing bilingual and English-only reading programs for English language learners. The review method is best-evidence synthesis, which uses a systematic literature search, quantification of outcomes as effect sizes, and extensive discussion of individual studies that meet inclusion standards. A total of 17 studies met the inclusion standards. Among 13 studies focusing on elementary reading for Spanish-dominant students, 9 favored bilingual approaches on English reading measures, and 4 found no differences, for a median effect size of +0.45. Weighted by sample size, an effect size of +0.33 was computed, which is significantly different from zero (p less than 0.05). One of two studies of heritage languages (French and Choctaw) and two secondary studies favored bilingual approaches. The review concludes that although the number of high-quality studies is small, existing evidence favors bilingual approaches, especially paired bilingual strategies that teach reading in the native language and English at different times each day. However, further research using longitudinal, randomized designs is needed to determine how best to ensure reading success for all English language learners.


**Abstract/Summary:** This report examines how the development of literacy in the native language plays a role in the acquisition of second language literacy, and how educators may determine when a student is ready to transition into English-only literacy programs by assessing the transfer of skills. In this report, transitional programs refer to instructional programs for students who have been schooled in their native language and are now in "transitional" classrooms receiving literacy instruction in English. Transition usually occurs during elementary school but may occur in middle and high school for older, recently arrived students who are
entering English-only literacy programs. Regarding literacy development and transition from a first to a second language, the paper highlights school age children who are acquiring English as a Second Language, where English is the societal language. This report reviews relevant evaluation studies and studies that investigate the transfer of skills from a first language to English. Understanding these aspects of transfer is important in planning transition programs. The information helps educators determine when English language learners should be transitioned into English instruction and the skills they are likely to have learned that will support English literacy acquisition. The paper discusses the relationship between English oral proficiency and literacy instruction in English and the ensuing educational implications, describing the elements of successful transition programs for English language learners. It concludes with recommendations for research and practice.

**Primary Grades**


**Abstract/Summary:** This study of 1,338 Spanish-speaking 1st graders examined contextual effects of bilingual programs on reading comprehension and the effect of language of instruction within these contexts. The study included 128 classrooms in 32 schools located in border Texas and in urban Texas and California. These classrooms used either English immersion or Spanish maintenance bilingual programs. Detailed observations of teachers' instructional language were made, sampled within the year. The analyses allowed classroom-level differences to be separated from student-level differences, and for Spanish and English passage comprehension to be considered simultaneously. While mean differences between programs were reduced for English passage comprehension, maintenance programs still outperformed immersion programs in Spanish. Results also indicated large program and locale covariance differences at the classroom level, implying important differences in how these programs operate in these locales.


**Abstract/Summary:** A longitudinal, experimental-control design was used to test the hypothesis that native language instruction enhances English language learner's (ELL's) native language and literacy development without significant cost to English development. In this
study, 31 Spanish-speaking preschoolers (aged 38-48 months) were randomly assigned to two Head Start classrooms differing only in the language of instruction (English and Spanish). As predicted, results showed that Spanish language instruction resulted in significantly higher growth on both Spanish oral vocabulary and letter-word identification measures. There were no significant differences between classrooms on these same measures in English. Results extend previous work by showing that Transitional Bilingual Education may be a viable alternative to traditional English-only models. Implications for theory, future research, and early childhood practice are discussed.


**Abstract/Summary:** How does age of first bilingual language exposure affect reading development in children learning to read in both of their languages? Is there a reading advantage for monolingual English children who are educated in bilingual schools? We studied children (grades 2-3, ages 7-9) in "bilingual" Spanish-English schools who were either from Spanish-speaking homes (new to English) or English-speaking homes (new to Spanish), as compared with English-speaking children in "monolingual" English schools. An early age of first bilingual language exposure had a positive effect on reading, phonological awareness, and language competence in both languages: early bilinguals (age of first exposure 0-3 years) outperformed other bilingual groups (age of first exposure 3-6 years). Remarkably, schooling in two languages afforded children from "monolingual" English homes an "advantage" in phoneme awareness skills. Early bilingual exposure is best for dual language reading development, and it may afford such a powerful positive impact on reading and language development that it may possibly ameliorate the negative effect of low SES on literacy. Further, "age of first bilingual exposure" provides a new "tool" for evaluating whether a young bilingual has a reading problem versus whether he or she is a typically-developing dual-language learner.


**Abstract/Summary:** The development of English and Spanish reading and oral language skills from kindergarten to third grade was examined with a sample of 502 Spanish speaking English language learners (ELLs) enrolled in three instructional programs. The students in the transitional bilingual and dual-language programs had significantly higher scores than the students in the English immersion program on the Spanish reading and oral language measures.
and significantly lower scores on the English reading comprehension and oral language measures. Multiple-group path models showed that the predictors of third grade English and Spanish reading comprehension did not differ across the three programs. Spanish phonological/decoding skill and oral language in first grade mediated the association between Spanish phonological/decoding skill and oral language in kindergarten and third grade Spanish reading comprehension. English phonological/decoding, Spanish phonological/decoding skill, and English oral language in first grade mediated the link between Spanish phonological/decoding skill in kindergarten and third grade English reading comprehension.


**Abstract/Summary:** The authors examined the effectiveness of a 2-year (kindergarten and first grade) oral English intervention provided to 534 Hispanic English-language learners in transitional bilingual education (TBE) and structured English immersion (SEI) programs. Using latent growth modeling, the authors compared instructional programs in relation to growth trajectories and rates in academic English oracy. The findings revealed that students in all four programs (treatment TBE, control TBE, treatment SEI, and control SEI) improved significantly (p less than 0.05) in a linear pattern over 2 years, and students receiving the intervention developed at a faster rate than those receiving typical instruction (p less than 0.05, effect sizes greater than 0.46). The authors concluded that (a) first-language instruction did not impede the learning of a second language, and (b) enhancements and best practices in TBE and SEI programs are needed to accelerate oral English acquisition to remove the initial disadvantage of low levels of English proficiency.

**Referrals**

**Organizations:**
- The National Association for Bilingual Education: [http://www.nabe.org](http://www.nabe.org)
- Center for Adult English Language Acquisition: [http://www.cal.org/cae](http://www.cal.org/cae)
- Colorín Colorado: [www.colorincolorado.org](http://www.colorincolorado.org)
Federally Funded Resources:

- Institute of Education Sciences (IES), public search engine available at: http://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/
- Office of English Language Acquisition: http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition: http://www.ncela.gwu.edu
- Center on Instruction: http://www.centeroninstruction.org

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