

Has Two-Way Been Oversold?*

Paradoxically, at a time when bilingual education is being dismantled by English-only legislation or abandoned by timid school boards, two-way bilingual programs are thriving in the United States. Since the late 1980s, their numbers have increased more than tenfold, according to an annual directory compiled by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL, 2002).¹

Although the number of students enrolled remains relatively small, the growth has been remarkable. It stems primarily from two factors. First is the increasing appeal of the two-way, or ‘dual language,’ approach for English-speaking parents who value bilingualism. It offers something for their children that all other pedagogies lack: peer models who are native speakers of the target language. These classrooms include English language learners (ELLs) from Spanish, Chinese, Korean, French, or Navajo backgrounds.

The second factor is near-unanimous enthusiasm for two-way programs among bilingual educators. Initially, the attraction reflected a political strategy. Opening bilingual programs to language-majority students might help to insulate the field from legislative attacks, the reasoning went. Why not enlist Anglo parents as allies in the cause of bilingualism for all? Increasingly, members of the field have come to embrace the two-way model for pedagogical reasons as well. Many have come to believe it may be the best way to bridge the persistent ‘achievement gap’ between language-minority and English-speaking students. Naturally, this would be welcome news – if true.

In a 1997 research report, Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier of George Mason University called two-way bilingual education ‘the program with the highest long-term academic success’ for ELLs (p. 52). They reported that, by the end of secondary school, graduates of such programs reach the 70th percentile² in English reading, far above their counterparts in other program models such as all-English immersion (23rd percentile) and early-exit bilingual education (24th percentile). Yet, inexplicably, Thomas and Collier (1997) provided no data tables to support their claims, only a summary graph.³ Nor was the study published in a peer-reviewed journal;

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it simply appeared on the website of the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. As a result, many fellow researchers have been understandably reluctant to endorse the Thomas-Collier findings.

Several other studies have since been published, with generally encouraging reports about the two-way approach. But such findings have been considerably less dramatic than those of Thomas and Collier. In the most comprehensive of these studies to date, Kathryn Lindholm-Leary (2001) found that ELLs in dual language reached the 29th percentile in English reading by 5th grade, substantially higher than average for ELLs statewide in California (16th percentile) but well below national norms for all students. Hardly the educational miracle that is sometimes portrayed.

Like most research in this area, Lindholm-Leary's study featured no controlled comparisons between two-way programs and other models for ELLs. This is problematic because, without controls for background variables, it is difficult to place much confidence in research findings. One notable exception to this pattern is a more recent study by Thomas and Collier (2002) in Houston, this time with achievement data included, which reported that two-way was superior to 'one-way' forms of bilingual education for students who were limited-English-proficient (LEP).

Again, however, the researchers' glowing conclusions are open to question. From the outset, Spanish-speaking students receiving two-way instruction performed extremely well, scoring at the 68th percentile in English reading in 1st grade. Even though these scores declined somewhat by 5th grade (52nd percentile), they remained higher than outcomes reported in any published study of ELL programs, two-way or otherwise. Also bear in mind that LEP students are typically reclassified as fully English-proficient around the 36th percentile. The obvious question, which the researchers failed to address, is why 1st graders scoring so far above that level were labeled LEP. If they were not LEP, doesn't that invalidate Thomas and Collier's findings?

It seems likely that these children came from homes where both English and Spanish are spoken. Like their Anglo counterparts, many Latino parents are eager for their children to have the advantages of fluent bilingualism and biliteracy. By all indications, the two-way model is well-adapted to meet those goals for academically 'advantaged' children, whatever their language background.

Whether it is also *the* ideal model for English learners who face obstacles associated with poverty and parental illiteracy remains uncertain. Is it generally superior, for example, to one-way developmental bilingual education (see, e.g., Crawford, 2004), whose promise is well-documented? That remains to be seen.

As Krashen (2004: 15) argues, thus far the evidence on two-way bilingual education is 'generally positive but variable.' While 'two-way programs show some promising results,' until more and better studies are published, there is too little scientific data to conclude 'they are the best possible program' for ELLs.

It is also worth remembering that, in education, there is no one-size-fits-all.

Notes

1. The figure is surely an understatement, given CAL's restrictive definition of 'two-way bilingual immersion,' which demands relative parity in ethnic enrollments. This criterion has excluded programs in south Texas and other areas where Hispanic students predominate.
2. For the sake of consistency, in this article normal curve equivalents (NCEs) have been converted to percentiles.
3. The graph refers to 'results aggregated from a series of 4–8 year longitudinal studies from well-implemented, mature programs in five school districts' (Thomas & Collier, 1997: 53). No other details are provided.