Commentary

The Education of Language-Minority Students: Where Are We, and Where Do We Need to Go?

Claude Goldenberg
California State University, Long Beach

Language-minority children, particularly those who are Spanish-speaking and from low-income backgrounds, generally do not do well in U.S. schools. Unfortunately, our schools' response to the challenge of non-English-speaking students has been uneven, fitful, and laced with political, ideological, and methodological controversies such as those swirling around bilingual education (Carter & Segura, 1979; Crawford, 1991). Despite pockets of success here and there (e.g., Kitchen & Biler, 1988), the overall picture for many of these students is troubling. Spanish-speaking students—even when taught and tested in Spanish—still score at the thirty-second percentile in relation to a national comparison group (taught and tested in English): in second and third grades, when they are still taught and tested in Spanish, their scores drop to the twenty-seventh percentile (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 1982, 1988). Eighty-five percent of Hispanic fourth and eighth graders read in English at a "basic" level or below. Over half score even below "basic," meaning they cannot demonstrate understanding of a text written at their grade level (Mullis, Campbell, & Fristrup, 1993).

There is little disagreement that a crisis exists. The real question is what should be done about it. Here is where things get difficult because of, first, the difficulty of sorting out the roots of the problem and, second, the scarcity of demonstrably effective solutions. I will try to illustrate these difficulties by discussing two of the many topics addressed by the authors of articles in this special issue—(1) low English academic engagement by limited-English-proficient (LEP) students and (2) the challenges of
making the transition from native language to mainstream English instruction.

Law Engagement In English: Not Enough English, or Not Enough Spanish?

Consider Areaga-Mayer and Perdomo-Rivera’s (1996, in this issue) findings that show astonishingly, low levels of oral engagement and academic talk among "at-risk" Latino students in regular (English mainstream) and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) middle- and elementary-classrooms. These findings accord with previous research showing that classrooms with language-minority students fail to provide environments that strongly support linguistic or academic growth (e.g., Ramirez, 1992).

Findings such as these have actually been reported regularly in the educational literature for years, and not just for LEP students (e.g., Cuban, 1984; Goodlad, 1984). Nonetheless, I was stunned to read that academic talk occurred during only 2% of the day for LEP students in the classrooms Areaga-Mayer and Perdomo-Rivera studied, total oral engagement was only 4% of the day. The percentages were slightly higher in ESL classes but still lower than anything I have seen reported previously.

Areaga-Mayer and Perdomo-Rivera argue that "These low levels of oral engagement (in English) illustrate a major reason why LEP students are not learning English in U.S. schools" (p. 251). Their data suggest that teachers' indiscriminate emphasis on whole-class instruction and individual seatwork severely limits these students' opportunities to talk, ask and answer questions, read aloud, and otherwise actively engage in learning language and content. Areaga-Mayer and Perdomo-Rivera are undoubtedly correct when they argue that teachers must organize their classrooms differently, making use of individualized instruction and small-group cooperative settings in order to stimulate more active engagement and create an environment for English language and academic development. Certainly, how teachers organize their classrooms has important consequences for students' learning opportunities and their achievement (Slavin, 1989).

Additional considerations are relevant, however, when analyzing the situation Areaga-Mayer and Perdomo-Rivera depict. The Hispanic students in their study were in a program where they received no primary language instruction at any point in their school careers; the only support provided was ESL pull-out. The fact that no academic talk rate was a meager 2% and the general engagement rate was below 50% might not be the result of classroom organizational factors only. These findings could also be a result of these students' not receiving sufficient primary language instruction to allow them to participate meaningfully in an English-speaking academic environment—even in ESL classes, which are presumably geared to their English development. True, primary language instruction by itself is not sufficient for high levels of meaningful talk and academic engagement by students (Ramirez, 1992), but it might be necessary for many students who come to school with limited academic backgrounds and opportunities in the home language.

Instruction in the Native Language, Achievement in English

The theory that undergirds most bilingual education programs in the United States today (e.g., California State Department of Education, 1981) holds that minority non-English-speaking students require instruction in their native language in order to attain high academic achievement in English. This might seem bizarrely counterintuitive to many; however, the idea one could get to the East by sailing West was once also bizarrely counterintuitive. Bilin
gual education theory, in brief, holds the following:

1. One learns most readily and easily in the language one knows best. -
home language. Learning new knowledge and skills in English while at the same time trying to learn to speak the language is very difficult, far more difficult than most people realize. For some learners, it might be academically crippling.

2. One can teach a great deal of academic knowledge and skills in one’s first language while simultaneously learning how to speak and understand a second.

3. What one learns in a first language is still known when one learns the second (English or the United States). In fact, what a person learns in a first language might actually help in learning a second, since it will make second language learning more meaningful.

Knowledge and skills learned in the first language are available—they transfer to the second language.

According to this theory, then, language-minority students are generally best served in programs that build academic knowledge in students’ home language, while helping to build proficiency in English. A body of evidence from both basic (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1992; Hakuta & Snow, 1986) and evaluation (e.g., Ramirez, 1992; Willig, 1985) research supports this theory and many of its tenets.

But both the theory and practice of bilingual education remain enriched in controversy. The debates take place on many levels—substantive, political, and ideological (e.g., Crawford, 1992; Porter, 1990) as well as methodological, technical, and statistical (e.g., Bilingual Research Journal, 1992; Meyers & Fienberg, 1991). Clearly, bilingual education can claim successes (Krashen & Biber, 1988): better designed and implemented studies are more likely to find positive effects (Willig, 1989). And Spanish-speaking students might start to “catch up” with English-speaking students if they are in effective bilingual programs that use Spanish through much of elementary school (Coller, 1992; Ramirez, 1992; Thomas, 1992).

Nevertheless, evaluations of bilingual programs are mixed, and even when programs appear successful, technical methodological issues cloud conclusions (e.g., Meyer & Fienberg, 1992 on the “Ramirez study”). In addition, even those of the most successful bilingual education models sometimes fail to produce desired effects (e.g., Samaniego & Ehrank, 1991). In Massachusetts, the first state to pass a law actually promoting bilingual education, in 1971, Hispanic students in bilingual education programs continue to perform poorly (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1994). And many Spanish-speaking students still tend to score below grade-level norms, even in well-established bilingual programs (Gersten & Woodward, 1995). Are these failures of bilingual education theory? Or of how the theory has been operationalized and put into practice? Or is it really a failure of our educational system more generally to address the needs of many culturally and linguistically diverse students, which then limits the effectiveness of an otherwise sound and reasonable theory?

In any case, using the theory as a guide, one could argue that nonparticipation of the students in Are, áa-Mayer and Pernèomo-Rivera’s study was not due to just classroom structures that discourage English oral academic engagement by LEP students but also to a program that fails to provide what many LEP students need most, namely, high-level and challenging instruction in the primary language. In fairness, I should note that the district where Are, áa-Mayer and Pernèomo-Rivera conducted their study served students from 14 different language backgrounds, so it might well be that a primary language program was simply impossible; even when students come from only one or two non-English backgrounds, finding qualified primary language teachers is still a huge problem (Gold, 1992). These two major issues that complicate things further.

If the theory underlying bilingual education is valid, an intervention that fails to include providing language-minority students with adequate primary language in-
Durling with "Transition"—or Refining the Problem?

Another thicket of difficulty is transition, the period in their schooling when language-minority students in native language programs make the shift from instruction that relies heavily on the native language to instruction that is exclusively in mainstream English. For many LEP students, issues of transition are not relevant, since they are not in native language programs requiring transition to English at some point. In California, fewer than one-half of LEP students are or have been in programs that make at least some instructional use of their native language (California State Department of Education, 1994). Nationally, only 36% of LEP students receive "significant" amounts of instruction in the native language; an additional 21% receive only minimal amounts—greater than 2% of instructional time but less than a "significant" amount. Even in kindergarten through second grade, the years when primary language instruction is most likely to be used, nearly 40% of LEP students receive virtually none (less than 1%) of their instruction in the primary language (Development Associates, 1993).

But for those students who do receive native language instruction in their early years, the timing, manner, and dynamics of the transition to English are likely to be important. Depending on a range of factors—the school's and district's program, individual student characteristics and background, when a student happens to begin attending the program—transition can occur anywhere from early elementary to middle school or later. As Russell Gerson (1996, in this issue) notes—and many teachers I know will confirm—the transition years are beset with difficulty and frustration for both students and teachers. During and following transition, students' classroom participation and achievement often go down; uncertainty, confusion, and special education referrals go up.

Transition is, undoubtedly, a crucial period in the education of LEP students, but one about which educators have little solid empirical basis for policy and practice. There is evidence, for example, that it takes students from 5 to 7 years in order to become sufficiently competent in a second language to succeed in mainstream classes (Curmins, 1989); abrupt removal of primary language instruction, moreover, can be detrimental to LEP students' academic progress (Kamirez, 1992).

Many other questions remain, however. For example: When should students make the transition? Is there a "threshold of primary language skills" (e.g., native language literacy level) or English language skills (e.g., oral proficiency in English) that LEP students should reach before transitioning? How can educators facilitate a successful transition from native language instruction to mainstream English classes? What sort of instruction and learning opportunities are most helpful? What is the appropriate mix of primary language and English—before, during, and after transition? When using English as the instructional medium, are these modifications that can be made so that instruction is both comprehensible and presents challenging content? These are questions about which there are strong opinions and many recommendations but little to go on empirically for elementary students and teachers dealing with transition.

It is, on the one hand, gratifying to read the articles in this special issue targeting topics relevant to these critical questions. Many of the ideas contained in this collection—Chamot and O'Malley's Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach, Anderson and Kurt's suggestions for linking reading comprehension and English language development, Klingner and Vaught's...
variations on reciprocal teaching. Areaga-Nayer and Perdomo-Rivera's classroom organizational factors, Rueda and García's insights into the theoretical orientations of teachers, and the many practical examples offered by the teachers profiled in articles by Bon and Reyes and Jiménez, Guten, and Rivera—offer promising hypotheses for how teachers might help students during this difficult and challenging period. Some of the suggested strategies have been around for a while (e.g., Rodríguez, 1984), but it can only be seen as a good thing that researchers and reflective practitioners are seeing their signs more clearly on the transition phase in language-minority students' school careers.

Or is it such a good thing? Perhaps reifying transition—making it an explicit phase of students' school program—is precisely the wrong thing to do. Some argue that transition is not, or should not be, an issue at all. It is one because schools make it one, and they do this by insisting on cutting off primary language instruction as soon as they think students are able to function in English mainstream classrooms (Wong Fillmore & Valadez, 1986). McLaughlin (1992) points out that many teachers "assume that once children can converse comfortably in English, they are in full control of the language" (p. 9). This is often not the case. Limited English-speaking students can require up to 7 years before they have mastered the abstract and decontextualized linguistic skills necessary for academic success in regular English classrooms (Cummins, 1980). Further, because of wide variability in the rate and way in which students acquire a second language (McLaughlin, 1992), there is some question as to whether it makes sense to have a formal transition period, no matter how flexible it might be applied. Some writers have suggested that students should "self-transition' rather than be "forced into mandatory 'transitional' environments" (García & Collo, 1995, p. 55).

Maintenance Instead of Transition? Consider, then, an alternative to having students make the transition from native language programs to all-English programs: Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, at least until they are reclassified (reclassified), " fluent English proficient" (FEP) and ideally, even once they have become FEP, remain in an instructional program that devotes some portion of the day to study in the primary language (e.g., literature or social studies). Students would participate in mainstream English classes, but this would not mean an end to academic study in the primary language. Not only would such an approach be truly bilingual, but, under these circumstances, transition would be less of an issue. Students would still have meaningful opportunities for academic success in the language they have been speaking (and in which they have received instruction) their entire lives. In addition, students might gain other benefits—further primary language development and high-level academic discourse, higher that could be accomplished through the medium of the second language. Both of these benefits can be obtained without sacrificing English language development (McLaughlin, 1992).

Of course, this alternative would generate much controversy, particularly among those who assume there is a direct, consistent, and positive correlation between time spent in all-English environment and English language and academic development. The evidence tends to challenge the commonsense notion that language-minority students achieve higher in English as a function of the amount of time they spend in an all-English instruction; in fact, there seems to be no direct relation between the amount of time spent in English instruction and academic achievement in English (McLaughlin, 1992; Ramirez, 1992), but there is a positive relation between time spent in primary language instruction and achievement in English (Collier, 1992).
Again, these conclusions run strongly counter to what seems so dearly intuitive.

How should these findings inform transition planning and policy? One obvious implication is that transitional, as a program phase or component, would disappear or at least be absorbed into a more seamless progression in which students develop from monolingual non-English speakers to bilingual fluent English speakers. California's "State Program for Students of Limited-English Proficiency" (California State Department of Education, 1996a) appears to be an example of such a framework. Developmental, or two-way, bilingual programs (Christians, 1996) provide other examples.

Many of the strategies and suggestions contained in the articles in this issue would still be viable, perhaps even more so. The big difference would be that they would be used in strikingly different contexts—ones that seek to use and extend students' home language in order to promote true bilingual competence rather than contexts that use the home language only as much as is necessary to promote competence in English. Bilingual education advocates clearly state that former contexts, and bilingual education theory predicts, it would produce superior results in terms of student outcomes in English. The question of values is not an empirical one; the question of outcomes surely could be.

Prospects and Possibilities—a Need for Balance

Given the complexity of the language and instruction issues, what I find most encouraging about the articles in this issue is the balanced approach to teaching and learning that overall they embody. This perspective—labeled variously throughout the articles as blended, balanced, integrated, monolingual, trilingual—is evident in Jiménez's "Apologies, Gespen, and Kivri's Conversations with a Chicana Teacher" (1996, in this issue). In response to the formidable challenge of helping students "build English language ability while teaching grade-level academic content" (p. 374), the teacher used her "deep understanding of how students perceive the classroom" to skillfully build a coherent and comprehensive framework.

This teacher used high-quality children's literature, a great deal of student writing, and student productions and field trips. Because she was from the Latino community, she was knowledgeable about home and community cultural practices, and she drew from this knowledge in her interactions with students and parents. She saw students' Spanish language and literacy skills as resources on which to build. She also clearly learned toward a structured teaching environment, and she explicitly taught students concepts, vocabulary, and skills they would need for success in academic English. The authors note that she "found that her earlier training in [one Hunter model of explicit/direct instruction enabled her always to conceptualize what her goals or goals were and to focus clearly on helping students achieve those goals." (p. 340)

A complementary case is presented by Bos and Reyes (1996, in this issue). This special education teacher (Elis Reyes) also used a "blended approach," that "weaves students' first language and culture into instructional conversations and curriculum, yet at the same time she incorporates direct instruction, practice, and transfer" (p. 343). Bos and Reyes's portrait of Elia suggests that this teacher placed less emphasis on structured, direct teaching than the teacher Jiménez et al. portray more on natural language development, students' sociocultural experiences, and collaborative learning. Elia came to view learning as an interactive process and the teacher as a facilitator who uses direct instruction only when needed (p. 359), yet, along with the same sort of cultural and linguistic sensitivity demonstrated by the teacher in Jiménez et al., Elia also seeks the need for explicit teaching at certain times for specific purposes. But she adds an important caution.
"I think that this type of interactive teaching, with contextualized, authentic learning and explicit instruction in skills and strategies is critical for the success of language-minority students with disabilities. However, it is more complex and difficult to orchestrate than using one or the other" (p. 346).

This theme—orchestrating a complex and polyphonic knowledge base—is one that Russell Gersten (1996, in this issue) addresses in "Literacy Instruction for Language-Minority Students: The Transition Years." Anyone concerned about the educational attainment of language-minority students should take heart from Gersten's ambitious and compelling synthesis of the various literatures that can inform this effort (see also Gersten & Jmenez, 1994). What I found most striking about Gersten's article was precisely what impressed me about the "two teacher" portrait—a nondoctrinaire, comprehensive view informing a vision of high-level academic achievement for these students. Although I suspect some will regard (or disregard) this synthesis as too eclectic and theoretically impure, I think this is precisely the way to proceed.

At the moment, no one theoretical perspective can claim demonstrable and consistent effects on all aspects of these (or any other) students' academic development. I applaud Gersten and colleagues' willingness and ability to draw from disparate theoretical orientations ranging from effective direct instruction to strategic reading skills training to language- and meaning-intensive literacy experiences for students.

How Do You Do It, and Does It Work?

What is needed now is clear-cut evidence of effects for programs and strategies suggested by these authors. This same need exists for related approaches currently receiving widespread attention. For example, advocates of "sheltered English" are sometimes called "specially designed academic instruction in English." Say this set of techniques that involves using visual props and a high degree of contextualization and redundancy during instruction can be used to teach intermediate or advanced ESL students challenging content in English, despite their lack of English facility (California State Department of Education, 1994b).

As compelling as many of these recommended practices are, there are still many questions about implementation (How do you do it?) and effects (Does it meaningfully influence student learning?). Many of the recommendations (e.g., reciprocal teaching and other strategic reading approaches) were developed with students learning to read in their primary language. It certainly makes sense to try them with students learning in a second language but educators should not take their efficacy in this different context for granted (see Rohsenshine & Meister, 1994). Other recommendations have considerable intuitive appeal and seem as if they should be fairly straightforward (e.g., promote more natural conversations in the classroom). But engaging students in natural conversations—that also have instructional value—has proven more difficult than one might realize (e.g., Wollman-Bonilla, 1994) and probably requires substantial staff development in contexts that support teachers' making fundamental changes in how they interact with students (Goldenberg & Calamore, 1991; Saunders & Goldenberg, forthcoming; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Hamann, 1991; Thrapp & Gallimore, 1989).

Although all the articles can claim substantial theoretical and/or practical foundation, there is still a significant need for assessment and evaluation data. The authors contributing to this special issue have produced some wonderful leads. The challenge now is, first, to translate this fine work into programs that have demonstrable effects on important student outcomes and, second, to work at making these programs work in schools serving limited-English-speaking students, researchers and prac-
famers should not underestimate the challenge of either.

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