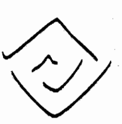
CHAPTER 4



# Strengthening the Transition in Transitional Bilingual Education

*William M. Saunders and Claude Goldenberg*

## INTRODUCTION

By the most conservative estimates, no fewer than 2.8 million children enter U.S. schools speaking little or no English (Crawford, 1997). Many of these students are in some form of *transitional bilingual education* (August & Hakuta, 1997), in which they receive literacy and content area instruction in their first language (L1) while learning to speak and comprehend English as a second language (L2). Once students have acquired a certain level of L1 literacy and adequate listening and speaking skills in English, they make the "transition" to English. In other words, they begin receiving formal instruction in English literacy and other academic subjects in English. The age or grade of the children at transition can vary widely depending upon the program and individual children.

Several types of programs have been designed to address the needs of English learners over the past three decades, most of which vary based on the amount and duration of instruction students receive in their primary language (see Genesee, 1999, for descriptions). At one end of the continuum, students receive no instruction in their primary language: Support is provided through specially designed English instruction. At the other end of the continuum, students receive a true bilingual education: They are taught and learn in their primary language and English at all grades. Transitional bilingual programs fall in the middle of the continuum, using primary language instruction for a period of time, then gradually adding or shifting students to all English instruction.

Although some evidence supports the use of transitional bilingual programs (Krashen & Biber, 1988; Willig, 1985), views about its effects relative to other programming options for English learners vary widely (see Rossell & Baker, 1996, for one perspective; see Thomas & Collier, 1997, for another). Despite the comparative issues, however, among researchers currently studying transitional bilingual education in the United States (Calderón, Hertz-Lazarowitz, & Slavin, 1998; R. Gersten, 1996; Goldenberg, 1996; Krashen, 1996), there is a growing consensus on two matters: (a) The period of transition is pivotal to subsequent achievement; and (b) despite a growing literature that sets forth potential directions, few empirical studies have investigated effective curriculum and pedagogy for the transition period.

Although many educators consider this period a positive indication that English

learners are entering the mainstream (Gándara & Merino, 1993), the transition period can be problematic for both students and teachers. If transition is handled too abruptly, subsequent achievement tends to stall or decline (Ramírez, 1992). Even in programs in which transition is handled more gradually, the transition period itself typically involves declines in academic challenge and student participation (Berman et al., 1992). Furthermore, students are more likely to be referred for compensatory or special education during the transition years (R. Gersten, 1996). In sum, transition is a crucial period during which many English learners are especially vulnerable to academic underachievement.

Unfortunately, educators have little research on which to base policy and practice (Goldenberg, 1996). Teachers tend to describe themselves as overwhelmingly uncertain about the appropriate methods to use during transition (Gersten & Woodward, 1994). Even in schools and districts recognized for their exemplary bilingual programs, transition is often a conundrum (Berman et al., 1992). Much of the existing research has focused on the timing and duration of transition (e.g., Ramírez, 1992). With few exceptions (Calderón et al., 1998), less attention has been devoted to empirical studies of effective instruction and curriculum for transition (R. Gersten, 1996).

This chapter reports the results of a long-term effort involving teachers and researchers in southern California, in the United States, to design, implement, and evaluate a transitional bilingual program for Spanish-speaking students. The goal is to improve substantially students' literacy achievement in English and Spanish. The first phase of our work focused on program development and evaluation and involved teams of three to four teachers from each of five schools (Saunders, 1999; Saunders, O'Brien, Lennon, & McLean, 1998). As we developed the program, the case study students moved from one project teacher's classroom to the next and across Grades 2–5 (ages 7–10). The second phase of our work involved several new school sites. The focus was on implementing the program throughout the school.

In this chapter, we describe the context in which the bilingual program takes place and the design, curriculum, outcomes, and distinguishing features of the program. We then offer practical ideas emanating from our work that might be applied to other contexts and situations.

## CONTEXT[1]

The schools where we have worked are in two different regions of a large metropolitan school district in southern California, both located in predominantly Latino, Spanish-speaking communities. Although English is obviously the most

[1] The project and context described in this chapter changed dramatically after California voters in 1998 approved a change in the California Education Code (known as Proposition 227) that in effect outlawed bilingual education under most circumstances. Although some transitional bilingual education programs exist in California, they are now far less common. The program at Henry Elementary (like virtually every program in the district) became all-English. Because we hope the results of this project will still be informative for those using transitional bilingual education models, we have decided to present this case study intact rather than complicating it by incorporating discussion of the fundamentally changed California context. Readers wishing additional information about Proposition 227 and its early impact are urged to consult Gándara et al. (2000).

commonly used language in the broader metropolitan area, in many local communities, like those in which we have worked, Spanish is the predominant language used within the context of small businesses, churches, and family support services, and on popular television and radio stations.

In such communities, typically no fewer than 25% of the families are recent arrivals to the United States, immigrating primarily from Mexico but also from Central American countries. Most children (65–80%) speak little or no English at the time they enter school (age 5). The vast majority of the families (80–90%) qualify for free or reduced-cost school lunches, a federal program supporting students from families with income levels at or below the poverty level. Such communities tend to be densely populated. Most families live in crowded, multiple-unit apartment buildings.

Our work has focused exclusively on elementary schools that span kindergarten through fifth grade (ages 5–10). Project schools have utilized transitional bilingual programs as a way of serving the needs of English language learners (students who enter school speaking little or no English).

The general guidelines followed throughout the district for transitional bilingual education programs are as follows. Students are taught literacy/language arts and academic subjects in Spanish while they acquire oral English proficiency (20–45 minutes of daily oral English language development [ELD] instruction). This program continues until students demonstrate approximately second-grade-level proficiency in Spanish reading and writing and basic oral English communicative skills, as measured by district-developed assessments. When students demonstrate these proficiencies, they qualify to transition and begin English reading and writing instruction; they continue receiving Spanish literacy instruction during this period.

According to the district guidelines, the transition period should last approximately 3–6 months and concentrate on nontransferable English skills, vocabulary development, oral and reading comprehension, and written language. During this period other academic subjects, starting with math and then including science and history/social studies, are taught through specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE, a set of teaching strategies designed to make concepts and language comprehensible to students).

Subsequent to the transition period, students enter a *mainstream* English program—the same program as native English speakers, without specific accommodation for English learners. Students are officially redesignated from *limited* to *fluent* English proficient (LEP to FEP) when they demonstrate grade-level or close to grade-level reading, writing, and oral language skills on standardized English language achievement tests.

Transitional bilingual education is the most common form of bilingual education for Spanish-speaking English learners in California (but see Footnote 1). At some schools, with relatively small numbers of Spanish-speaking students, the transitional bilingual program operates much like a school within a school. In contrast, at most of the schools where we have worked, Spanish-speaking English learners constitute the vast majority of the student population (70–95%), and transitional bilingual education functions as a schoolwide program.

The academic achievement level at most of our schools is typically low relative to state and national norms. When tested in English in Grades 4 and 5, students have scored substantially below national norms, with schoolwide averages ranging from

the 15th to the 25th national percentile in reading and math (the 50th percentile represents the national norm). Even when tested in Spanish in Grades 1 and 2, students tend to score below national norms: Schoolwide averages have ranged from the 30th to the 42nd national percentile (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991).

Our work has focused on improving the quality and outcomes of the transitional bilingual program provided in such schools. As part of that effort, we have also concentrated on the overall functioning and effectiveness of the school (see Goldenberg & Sullivan, 1994). In this chapter, we describe the transitional bilingual program we have developed and researched. Outcome data are based on results from one of our case study schools, Henry Elementary (a pseudonym), where we worked with staff for 3 years to implement our transitional program and improve school effectiveness (see Saunders & Goldenberg, 2000).

## DESCRIPTION

### Multiyear Design for Transition

The multiyear design for transition optimally spans Grades 2–5 (ages 7–10). Grades 2 and 3 are referred to as Pretransition, Grade 4 is Transition I, and Grade 5 is Transition II (see Table 1).

As we began initial work on transitional bilingual programs, two things were apparent: (a) Students were not being effectively prepared to qualify for transition, and (b) the transitional program students received when they did qualify was, at best, underspecified (Saunders, 1999).The concept of a pretransition component is designed to emphasize the fundamental role of Spanish reading and writing and oral English development that precedes transition. Large numbers of students were not

TABLE 1. DESIGN AND GOALS FOR THE MULTIYEAR TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM

| *Phase* | *Optimal Grades (Ages)* | *Goals* | *Measurable Outcome* |
|---|---|---|---|
| | K–1 (5–6) | • Initial reading and writing proficiency (Spanish)<br>• Early production II (oral English) | Existing norm- or criterion-referenced measures |
| Pretransition | 2–3 (7–8) | • Grade-appropriate reading and writing achievement (Spanish)<br>• Speech emergence (oral English) | Criteria for the Addition of Reading in English (district transition instrument) |
| Transition I | 4 (9) | • Initial reading and writing proficiency (English)<br>• Academic oral language proficiency (English)<br>• Grade-appropriate reading and writing achievement (Spanish) | Existing norm- or criterion-referenced measures |
| Transition II | 5 (10) | • Grade-appropriate reading and writing achievement (English) | Redesignation from limited to fluent English proficient |

qualifying to enter transition because they were not achieving second-grade-level Spanish literacy skills, and they were not acquiring oral English skills. The understanding we tried to develop at project schools was that problems with the transitional program could not be addressed without devoting serious attention to Spanish literacy and oral English development in the early grades. As part of this effort, we explicitly included Grades 2 and 3 as a pretransition phase in the larger transitional program. The thrust of this phase is intensive Spanish reading and writing instruction and extensive oral English development. The goal of pretransition is to have all students performing at grade level in Spanish reading and writing, and at the speech emergence level (i.e., able to converse) or higher in oral English, by the end of third grade. If the goal is achieved, students should have no problem passing the district assessment to qualify for transition.

The problem with transition itself was that schools grossly underestimated the period of time that should be devoted to it. The district's 3- to 6-month guidelines encouraged schools to think of transition as a relatively short period sandwiched between Spanish and mainstream English language arts, so short as to prohibit any serious attention to curriculum or teacher training.

The concept of Transition I and II was designed to make explicit the need for a concrete transitional program of serious substance and duration. By the end of Transition I, students should be able to decode and demonstrate a basic understanding of end-of-third-grade English reading material (within a year of the students' academic grade). They should also increase their academic oral English language proficiency (intermediate fluency) such that they can participate actively in academically oriented discussions. Finally, students should continue to demonstrate grade-level Spanish reading and writing proficiency. We maintain Spanish literacy instruction throughout the entire year of Transition I to support students' Spanish literacy development and draw clear connections between the processes of reading and writing in Spanish and in English.

By the end of Transition II, students should be decoding and comprehending grade-level material in English and thus be prepared to perform successfully in a mainstream program. During Transition II, teachers encourage students to read and write in Spanish on their own, but language arts instructional time is devoted exclusively to English reading and writing.

## Instructional Components for the Language Arts Program

We identified 12 components for language arts instruction that seemed most effective in addressing student needs (see Table 2; for further description of each component see Saunders, 1999). Some of these instructional components were intended specifically to address the needs of transition students, but many stand on their own as effective language arts strategies for the middle and upper elementary grades. We employ this 12-component language arts program across Grades 2–5, in Spanish and then in English, as students move through the three phases of the multiyear transition design: Pretransition, Transition I, and Transition II.

### *Literature Study Components*

The core component of our language arts program is the study of literature. Based on research conducted as part of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program in

Table 2. Instructional Components of the Language Arts Program for Grades 2–5

| *Literature Study* | *Skill Building* | *Other Supporting Components* |
|---|---|---|
| Literature units (experience-text relationship) | Comprehension strategies | Pleasure reading |
| Literature logs | Assigned independent Reading | Teacher read-alouds |
| Instructional conversations | Dictation | Interactive journals |
| Culminating writing projects (writing as a process) | Lessons on written conventions | |
| | Oral English language development through literature | |

Hawaii (Au, 1979, 1992; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) and Spanish-speaking Latino communities in southern California (Goldenberg, 1992/1993), we adapted the experience-text-relationship approach as our framework for literature units. Through ongoing discussions (instructional conversations), writing activities (literature logs and culminating writing projects), and reading, the teacher helps students study a story in relation to their own experiences and a central theme. Discussions set up writing assignments, and writings inform subsequent discussions throughout the course of the literature unit. Writing provides opportunities for students to articulate ideas, interpretations, and related experiences. Discussions provide opportunities for students and teacher to build more elaborated and sophisticated understandings.

Literature units culminate with a written project that serves two goals: (a) developing a deeper understanding of some aspect of the unit (e.g., content, themes, related personal experiences) and (b) developing a high-quality piece of writing. Teachers teach writing as a process in the course of these culminating projects. Students share drafts, receive feedback from peers, conference with the teacher, and revise and edit their work. They also receive lessons from the teacher that are specific to the kind of writing involved in the project (e.g., narration, information, persuasion).

We assume that through this recurrent process of individual and social discourse—reading, writing, and discussing—literature units help students learn to comprehend text, make connections between the text and their own lives, and develop more fully formed concepts. We also assume that literature units help provide substantial comprehensible input—language that is at a somewhat higher level than the learners can understand on their own but that is understandable within the total context in which it is used. The literature unit thus becomes a meaningful social context in which words, phrases, language structures, and concepts are used, acquired, and learned, thereby promoting L2 (English) development (Cummins, 1989; Krashen, 1987; see Saunders et al., 1998, for a detailed explanation of our approach to literature).

### *Skill-Building Components*

As we found throughout our work, literature study needs to be complemented by additional skill-building components. Students need direct instruction in specific

reading comprehension strategies (e.g., predicting, summarizing, questioning), and they need daily opportunities to read texts geared to their reading level—that is, assigned independent reading. Comprehension strategies are presented in 2-week modules in the first and fourth quarters of the year. Assigned independent reading is completed on a weekly basis throughout the year. Ideally, this reading includes materials related to the literature unit, but teachers have used grade-specific anthologies or other published reading comprehension materials (e.g., Parker, 1969) to ensure that students have materials they can read independently and use to practice comprehension strategies. Students need similar study and practice for written language. As part of the weekly dictation program, students study a short but carefully targeted passage. The teacher provides lessons on specific conventions (e.g., punctuation, capitalization, grammar), and students practice writing the passage as it is dictated to them by a peer or parent, compose original sentences and paragraphs that include the target conventions, and study words from the passage they have difficulty spelling.

ELD Through Literature (developed by project consultants Dolores Beltran and Gisela O'Brien; see Beltran & O'Brien, 1993) is a daily, 45-minute oral English program used in the pretransition phases of the program. Instruction is delivered to students in small, homogeneous groups based on proficiency level. Lessons and independent activities are all drawn from a particular literature selection. The lesson's focus and teacher's talk are geared specifically to students' proficiency level. Literature seems to provide a meaningful and motivating context for learning and practicing targeted English oral language skills. It also exposes children to English print well in advance of formal transition to English. ELD Through Literature is an integral part of our pretransitional program (Grades 2 and 3).

### *Other Supporting Components*

In all grades, teachers read to students for approximately 20 minutes at least three times per week. Teacher read-alouds expose students to the language of expert writers and the fluency of an expert reader, engage students in material they may not yet be able to read on their own, and introduce students to new authors and genres. In addition, a portion of time each day is devoted to reading for pleasure. Students choose their own books and stories, keep records of their reading, and, for those books they find most interesting, complete short assignments (e.g., summaries, synopsis, oral presentations, drawings). Finally, many Transition I teachers use interactive journals during the first half of the year, when students are making their first attempts at English writing.

## Program Outcomes

Longitudinal evaluations conducted during the initial phase of our work, as the program was being developed, indicated that the program was significantly more effective than programs students typically received (Saunders, 1999). In comparison to a matched sample of comparable students from neighboring schools in the district, project students (a) scored significantly higher on both standardized and performance-based measures of Spanish literacy in Grade 3 and English literacy in Grade 5; (b) were more likely to be reclassified as FEP by the end of Grade 5; and (c) were significantly more likely to report frequent independent reading, use of the public library, and more positive attitudes toward their L1.

As part of our work at Henry Elementary, we have been attempting to implement the program and replicate effects schoolwide. To gauge the effects of the transitional program on students, we collected outcome data at baseline and across the 3 years of the project at Henry and three neighboring, comparable schools. Data from random samples of second and fifth graders included standardized test scores, performance assessments, bilingual program assessments, and attitude surveys. Second-grade results for baseline and Years 1 and 2 provide an indication of improvements in the Spanish literacy portion of the program, Pretransition. Fifth-grade results for baseline and Years 1–3 provide an indication of improvements in the English literacy portion of the program, Transition I and II. (Note that Year 3 data are not available for second graders.)

Table 3 shows Spanish literacy results for random samples of second graders (age 7). Across Years 1 and 2, standardized test results for Spanish reading and language increased from baseline substantially, rising from the 38th to the 69th percentile in reading and from the 47th to the 64th in language. Year 2 levels were well above those for similar students from comparable schools taken the same year: the 41st percentile in reading and the 37th in language, respectively.

Performance assessments conducted in Spanish across Years 1 and 2 also showed a steady increase in the numbers of second graders who demonstrated grade-level or close to grade-level achievement on all tasks. Performance assessments were scored on a 5-point scale as follows: 5, above grade-level performance; 4, grade-level performance; 3, close to grade-level performance; and 2 and 1, below grade-

TABLE 3. SPANISH LITERACY OUTCOMES FOR SECOND GRADERS

| | Henry Elementary | | | Comparable Schools |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Indicator*** | ***Baseline (n = 13)*** | ***Year 1 (n = 16)*** | ***Year 2 (n = 16)*** | ***Year 2 (n = 41)*** |
| Standardized tests | | | | |
| Reading | | | | |
| NCE[a] mean | 43.22 | 53.12 | 60.34 | 45.27 |
| *SD* | 24.12 | 25.40 | 19.34 | 13.94 |
| Percentile rank | 38 | 56 | 69 | 41 |
| Language | | | | |
| NCE mean | 48.61 | 58.83 | 57.54 | 43.24 |
| *SD* | 19.41 | 29.97 | 20.28 | 15.75 |
| Percentile rank | 47 | 66 | 64 | 37 |
| Performance assessment | | | | |
| % averaging ≥ 3.00 | 8 | 29 | 38 | 11 |
| Independent reading | | | | |
| % listing ≥ 10 items | 23 | 28 | 44 | 22 |

*Note.* Based on annual random samples of English learners.

[a]Normal curve equivalent.

level performance. At baseline, only 8% of the Henry sample averaged a score of 3 or better on all performance assessment tasks. The percentage rose to 28% in the Year 1 sample and 38% in the Year 2 sample. Year 2 levels were again well above those for students from comparable schools, where only 11% averaged a score of 3 or better. Results also showed a modest increase among Henry second graders in independent reading. The number of students listing 10 or more books and stories they had read on their own over the course of the year improved from 23% at baseline to 44% in Year 2, twice as high as the percentage among comparable students in the Year 2 sample (22%).

Table 4 includes results for random samples of fifth-grade students (age 10) based on English language standardized and performance based measures. (Standardized testing results are not listed for the baseline year because they were based

TABLE 4. ENGLISH LITERACY OUTCOMES FOR FIFTH GRADERS

| | Henry Elementary | | | | Comparable Schools | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Indicator*** | ***Baseline (n = 20)*** | ***Year 1 (n = 17)*** | ***Year 2 (n = 20)*** | ***Year 3 (n = 20)*** | ***Year 2 (n = 53)*** | ***Year 3 (n = 56)*** |
| Standardized tests | | | | | | |
| Reading | | | | | | |
| NCE[a] mean | | 28.82 | 34.18 | 37.30 | 29.91 | 32.92 |
| *SD* | | 23.55 | 16.13 | 17.52 | 16.01 | 14.19 |
| Percentile rank | | 16 | 22 | 27 | 17 | 21 |
| Language | | | | | | |
| NCE mean | | 34.88 | 41.37 | 43.16 | 34.14 | 37.04 |
| *SD* | | 19.12 | 15.01 | 18.29 | 18.24 | 18.62 |
| Percentile rank | | 24 | 34 | 37 | 23 | 27 |
| Performance assessment | | | | | | |
| % averaging ≥ 3.00 | 15 | 19 | 32 | 35 | 14 | 7 |
| Independent reading | | | | | | |
| % listing ≥ 10 items | 15 | 24 | 28 | 30 | 9 | 13 |
| Literacy attitudes (%) | | | | | | |
| Like reading and writing in Spanish | 58 | | 59 | 85 | 51 | 56 |
| Continue reading and writing in Spanish | 53 | | 59 | 85 | 56 | 43 |
| Like reading and writing in English | 80 | | 84 | 95 | 91 | 95 |
| Continue reading and writing in English | 89 | | 100 | 100 | 92 | 93 |

*Note.* Based on annual random samples of English learners.
[a]Normal curve equivalent.

on a different test.) Standardized tests showed an 11-point improvement across Years 1, 2, and 3 in reading (16th, 22nd, and 27th percentiles) and a 13-point increase in language (24th, 34th, and 37th percentiles). Results for the comparable schools taken in Years 2 and 3 showed modest increases: from the 17th to the 21st percentile in reading and from the 23rd to the 27th percentile in language. Year 3 comparisons showed Henry's students performing somewhat better than students from the comparable schools: in reading, 27th versus 21st; in language, 37th versus 27th.

The 4 years of performance assessment results show a steady increase in the percentage of Henry fifth graders demonstrating grade-level or close to grade-level achievement: from 15% at baseline to 35% in Year 3. Year 2 and 3 results for students from the comparable schools were similar to those of Henry at baseline: 14% and 7%. The pattern is much the same for independent reading. At baseline, 15% of the fifth-grade Henry sample listed 10 or more books or stories. By Year 3, the figure had risen to 30%. Year 2 and 3 percentages for students from comparable schools were 9% and 13%.

For students from both Henry and comparable schools, attitudes toward reading and writing in English were uniformly positive. Between 80% and 100% of the students said they liked reading and writing in English and wanted to continue to learn how to read and write better in English. However, the Year 3 results for Henry showed a marked increase in the percentage of students reporting positive attitudes toward Spanish literacy. Whereas in Year 2 only about one half of Henry's students expressed positive attitudes toward reading and writing in Spanish, in Year 3, 85% said they liked reading and writing in Spanish and wanted to continue learning how to read and write better in Spanish. In contrast, in both Years 2 and 3 only about half of the comparison students expressed positive attitudes toward Spanish literacy.

Additional schoolwide data also suggest an improved transitional bilingual program. The annual percentage of English learners in Grade 5 who passed the transition assessment by the end of third grade increased with each successive Henry cohort: 45% at baseline, 53% in Year 1, and 65% in Years 2 and 3. In comparison, among the Year 2 and 3 fifth graders at the comparable schools, the percentages of students passing the assessment were 41% and 47%. In addition, the annual percentage of students redesignated from LEP to FEP by fifth grade increased with each successive cohort at Henry, from 24% at baseline to 38% in Year 3. Year 2 and 3 averages for the comparable schools were 26% and 23%, respectively.

Overall, the results show a pattern of improved literacy outcomes at Henry Elementary. In both grades, Henry students are performing well above comparable students at neighboring schools. A clearer indication of the total effect of the program will be evident among the cohorts of students in the fifth-grade samples in Years 4 and 5. These cohorts will include students who participated in all phases of the program: Pretransition (Grades 2 and 3), Transition I, and Transition II.

The results for subsequent samples of fifth graders will be analyzed carefully. The levels of English achievement produced thus far, albeit with students who have not yet participated in all phases of the program, suggest that there is still much work to be done. Scoring at the 27th or the 34th percentile still puts students well below national norms. Similarly, performance assessments, even in Year 3, showed only 35% of students demonstrating grade-level or close to grade-level achievement.

One final aspect of our program deserves explanation. The explicit goal typically associated with transitional bilingual education, including our program, is English

literacy (i.e., L2 literacy)—not bilingualism and biliteracy. Although we found that students in the program demonstrated significantly higher levels of Spanish literacy than matched controls did (Saunders, 1999), these results are only an indication of the stability of skills acquired in the earlier phases of our transitional program. Ongoing biliteracy development, we believe, requires a true bilingual program: L1 and L2 curriculum, instruction, and ongoing evaluation. Ultimately, we think the interests of all students, English learners and English speakers, are better served in programs such as these, which promote language and literacy development in two or more languages, as described in other chapters in this volume.

## DISTINGUISHING FEATURES

Four theoretical principles undergird the program: challenge, continuity, connections, and comprehensiveness. Each represents a condition for language and literacy learning that we think are central to effective transitional bilingual programs. They are also grounded in the research literature, specifically studies that have tried to identify the characteristics of more and less successful programs for English learners (Berman et al., 1992; García, 1992; Gersten & Jiménez, 1993; Goldenberg, 1990; Ramírez, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 1997). In this section, we discuss these four principles and how they are manifested in our program.

### Challenge and the Study of Literature in Depth

We have tried to design a program that consistently challenges students academically—challenges them to think, learn, and engage intellectually. Within the context of the language arts program, we have tried to elaborate and instantiate the challenge principle most directly through the teaching of literature. In some cases, teachers and their students study novels. In other cases, they study short stories from grade-level reading anthologies. In either case, students study the work in depth over an extended period (6–8 weeks).

This practice is a fairly sharp departure from most reading programs designed for students in transition, which typically take a more linguistic or phonological approach. Such programs typically prescribe approximately a story a week, and students move successively across texts featuring increasingly challenging English phonological patterns, vocabulary, and sentence structures. While attending to the linguistic appropriateness of the reading matter, we have given equal emphasis to the content and themes of the stories and their potential intellectual challenge for students. We try to address students' need for additional and appropriately challenging reading experiences through assigned independent reading and pleasure reading (described earlier).

### Continuity and the Language Arts Program

We have concentrated heavily on achieving continuity in curriculum and instruction as students move from the primary, to the middle, to the upper grades and from L1 to L2 language arts. We have tried to address continuity through our 12-component language arts program, which we employ across Grades 2–5 as students move from predominantly Spanish to English instruction. In all program grades, instruction includes literature units, instructional conversation, literature logs, assigned

independent reading, comprehension strategies, pleasure reading, writing projects, dictation, and conventions lessons.

Program teachers report that this program has been extremely beneficial. As students transition to English reading and writing, they essentially engage in the same kinds of instruction and activities as they did in Spanish. Students have a fairly clear sense of what they are expected to do when they participate in any of the 12 program components. As we have observed and teachers report, this continuity reduces students' anxiety about the transition to English and provides support for their initial efforts to read and write in English (see Calderón et al., 1998, for similar emphasis on continuity).

### Connections and Small-Group Instruction

Through specific pedagogy and classroom organization, we place a strong emphasis on building upon students' existing knowledge, skills, and experiences and making explicit connections to the academic curriculum to be learned (including language, literacy, and content). Through literature logs, students consistently have the opportunity to write about, share, and connect their own experiences with the literature they are studying. Moreover, transition teachers make an effort to connect and build on the literature studies students engage in during Pretransition: Themes students studied when reading a story written in Spanish are revisited when they read a story written in English. Transition teachers also make explicit efforts to connect and build on the same strategies to which students have been introduced during Pretransition in order to help students recognize the commonalities of reading and writing in Spanish and in English.

We also try to address the connections principle through small-group instruction, which is the basic classroom organization through which students study literature and receive English language development instruction. We have utilized small-group instruction to maximize individual student participation. This arrangement provides increasing opportunities for students to produce language, engage in discussions, and receive direct support from the teacher. Within such small-group contexts, the teacher's role is help students elaborate thoughts and language and make connections they might not otherwise make.

### Comprehensiveness and Multiple Literacy Outcomes

We have tried to design a program that addresses both meaning and skills, both higher level thinking and appropriate drill and practice, and provides complementary portions of student- and teacher-centeredness. Teachers and students engage in a wide variety of academic and literacy-related activities. Teachers lead discussions and conduct directed lessons, facilitate group work and conference with individual students, demonstrate strategies and correct exercises. Students read for pleasure and read on assignment, develop written projects and do dictation, participate in literary discussions and receive formal lessons.

This comprehensive approach is reflected in the literacy outcomes we evaluate and strive to achieve, including demonstrating mastery of discrete reading and language skills on standardized, multiple-choice, timed tests; utilizing broader literacy competencies on more extended reading and writing performance assessment tasks; and forming healthy literacy-related habits and attitudes, such as

frequent, self-selected independent reading and positive perceptions of students' own bilingualism and biliteracy.

## PRACTICAL IDEAS

The program described in this chapter comprises 12 language arts components organized into a multiyear design for transition. Evaluation results suggest that the program produces outcomes superior to those achieved by the transitional program students typically receive in southern California schools. Without adopting our specific program, however, schools can likely improve the quality and outcomes of their transitional bilingual programs, and perhaps other forms of bilingual education, by focusing attention on six key areas. Our premise is that the effectiveness of a transitional bilingual program is based on the individual effectiveness and careful coordination of its various elements.

### Emphasize the Achievement of L1 Literacy in the Early Grades

In a transitional bilingual program, a fundamental goal in Grades 1–3 must be teaching English learners to read and write well in their L1. Providing primary language instruction during the early grades is a worthwhile way to support students' entry to school. But the short-term language accommodation is not nearly as important as the longer term matter of students' actual academic achievement. High levels of achievement in L1 literacy often facilitate subsequent English literacy learning. Moreover, students who do well academically in the earlier grades tend to do well in the later grades. Early academic success is imperative.

### Emphasize the Achievement of Oral L2 Proficiency in the Early Grades

By design, students in transitional bilingual programs receive language arts and content area instruction in the L1 while learning to speak and comprehend the L2. As we have observed in countless schools, however, oral ELD often is neglected. First, it competes for time with other curricular areas taught in the L1, such as language arts, math, science, and social studies. Second, even when time is devoted to ELD, it is easy to assume that students are acquiring English simply because the teacher spends some portion of the day speaking in English. In fact, students benefit the most when teachers spend a portion of the day actually teaching English: targeting interactions and instruction on specific vocabulary and language structures appropriate to students' level of ELD.

### Establish the Means to Identify Students Prepared to Add Transitional Language Arts

A core premise of transitional bilingual education is that, at some point, students reach a threshold and develop sufficient oral L2 proficiency and L1 literacy to make a successful transition to L2 literacy instruction. Transitional bilingual programs should have criteria and an instrument for identifying students prepared to add transitional language arts (i.e., English reading and writing instruction). There are different views on how rigorous those criteria should be. The criterion we set was approximately a third-grade reading level in the L1 and conversational proficiency in

the L2 (English). A school might choose more or less rigorous criteria, but the more important matter is that the criteria are set and measured. Such criteria support the two practical ideas discussed above: They function as L1 literacy and oral L2 proficiency goals or benchmarks for teachers to target and achieve in the early grades.

### Establish a Transitional Language Arts Program

In many schools in California, the period of transition itself is sorely neglected, often because it is not well understood. Many times, new and inexperienced teachers are assigned transition classes and left to their own devices in determining what to teach and how to teach it. We strongly recommend that schools devote careful attention to transitional language arts curriculum, assessments, and staffing. A transitional language arts program should include a coherent sequence of goals and objectives, guidelines for the teacher, interesting reading material that provides appropriate and increasingly challenging written texts, and specific assessments teachers can use to gauge how students are progressing.

### Continue to Teach and Promote L1 Literacy During Transition

In our project, we try to sustain L1 literacy instruction throughout the first year of transition (Transition I). During both the first and the second years of transition (Transition I and II), we encourage students to continue using their Spanish literacy skills. To the extent possible, we stock classrooms with Spanish and English reading material and textbooks. Teachers encourage students to choose English and Spanish language books for pleasure reading. They also show students how to use Spanish language textbooks to supplement their learning from English language textbooks (e.g., in history and social studies).

Students from our program, in contrast to comparable students not in our program, maintained positive attitudes toward their L1 across the transition years. Such attitudes might influence students' subsequent achievement. Thus, schools should carefully consider resources and practices they can deploy in order at least to encourage and facilitate students' continued engagement in L1 literacy.

### Establish the Means to Identify Students Prepared for Mainstream Language Arts

In most schools and districts in California and throughout the United States, the issue of moving students into the mainstream program is extremely problematic. Few schools have clear criteria or instruments to identify students prepared for mainstream programming, wherein they no longer receive support and accommodations afforded English learners. Typically, students are placed in mainstream programs some time after they have made the transition. In the worst-case scenario, the mainstream program is the transitional program.

We strongly recommend that schools examine what, if any, criteria they are using to place students in mainstream instruction. Typically, schools in the United States are under substantial political pressure to move English learners into the mainstream. As a result, they often do not use L2 literacy achievement criteria to identify students prepared for mainstream instruction because often large numbers

of students do not meet the criteria. Unfortunately, such practices tend to leave program improvement unattended. In contrast, establishing and using mainstreaming criteria serves to draw attention to program effectiveness. If, for example, large numbers of students are not meeting the mainstream criteria, the transitional bilingual program, including every element addressed above, needs serious attention and improvement.

## CONCLUSION

For most of the 1980s and 1990s, transitional bilingual education existed in California schools in order to accommodate the needs of English learners and provide them with equal educational opportunity. Some schools scattered throughout the state established bilingual programming in order to explicitly promote biliteracy for English learners and for native English speakers learning other languages. Although in our view such an approach is far preferable to a transitional approach, in which the primary language is used only as a bridge to English proficiency, such programs are relatively rare. Far more common are schools and districts that established and maintained bilingual programming under the assumption that it provides, relative to English-only programming, a better opportunity for English learners to succeed in school and ultimately learn English.

Analysts at the two ends of the bilingual education continuum have expressed skepticism about transitional programs. According to opponents of bilingual education (e.g., Rossell & Baker, 1996), transitional programs simply delay children's development of English language skills and their entry into the English mainstream. Among proponents of bilingual education, transitional programs are inadequate half-measures, better than all-English immersion but inferior to bilingual education that is truly bilingual—that is, in which the goal is for children to learn and be competent in both English and their home language (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

In any event, and whatever their virtues or shortcomings, this much is clear: Transitional programs can work only if there are well-articulated and implemented practices and procedures to help English learners acquire critical knowledge, skills, and dispositions as they progress through their school careers. Much remains to be done if these students are to receive the opportunities they need to achieve at adequate academic levels. Nonetheless, the transitional program described here represents one effort to move transitional bilingual programming in this direction.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work herein was supported under the Education Research and Development Program, PR/Award No. R306A60001, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, for the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education, and the reader should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

## CONTRIBUTORS

William M. Saunders is a research associate and study director at the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence at California State University, Long Beach, in the United States. His areas of interest are K–12 language arts curriculum, instruction, and assessment; bilingual and alternative programs for English language learners; and school change.

Claude Goldenberg is associate dean of the College of Education and principal investigator for the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence at California State University, Long Beach. His areas of interest include Spanish-speaking children's literacy development, early literacy instruction, home-school connections to support academic achievement, and processes of school change and improvement.