

US education's known unknowns

The debate about the language of instruction in schools has obscured and hampered effective research into improving the learning of students who do not have English as their first language

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The US has seen enormous growth in its population of 5- to 17-year-olds who are English language learners, or ELLs. The population of ELLs in US schools has gone from 2 million to more than 5 million - more than 10% of the primary and secondary student population - in less than 20 years.

By law, ELLs must receive comprehensible and meaningful instruction - a tall order, since these students face the challenge of learning the regular academic curriculum that all students must learn as they simultaneously acquire proficiency in the kind of English required for classroom success.

Historically, research in the US on how to improve achievement among ELLs has been dominated by language of instruction, the so-called "bilingual education" question: do ELLs achieve better if they are instructed in their home language (in addition to English) or if they are immersed in English straightaway and exclusively? The debate has been highly charged politically and ideologically, which is understandable. Language can be a bit like religion. Passions run high and data rarely play a role in resolving disputes.

One of the consequences of the near-exclusive focus on language of instruction has been that research is surprisingly sparse on many important topics, such as what constitutes effective instruction in English for ELLs and whether and how we can accelerate English language development (ELD). Much of the ELL research has also paid little attention to student outcomes; as a result, many studies can not say anything very informative about whether students are likely to learn more or less if teachers do one thing rather than another.

Fortunately the research base is evolving. More research is being conducted on topics previously ignored, and there is more emphasis on gauging student outcomes in relation to different types of educational experiences students receive. Yet there is a great deal that we cannot say with any degree of confidence. This should make us cautious when people make claims about research-based effective practices for ELLs.

Recent syntheses of research on ELLs in the US suggest some important areas of converging evidence; they also reveal important questions.

The first area of convergence suggests that ELLs probably do not require a set of pedagogical tools fundamentally different from what English speakers require. What are these components (or tools)? Educators could come up with somewhat different lists, but generally speaking they would include, for example, clear goals and objectives for students; appropriate and challenging

material; well-designed instruction and instructional routines; clear input and modelling; active engagement and participation by students; informative performance feedback; application of new learning; practice and periodic review; interaction with other students and frequent assessments, with re-teaching as needed.

The question is whether these elements of "generic" effective instruction are sufficient to help ELLs succeed. In other words, is good teaching for ELLs "simply good teaching"? The answer is probably not, but we don't really know with any degree of confidence.

Which leads us to the second area of convergence: modifications or enhancements are necessary, primarily due to language limitations. Educators must never forget that ELLs face a formidable double challenge: they must learn the academic content everyone must learn, while simultaneously learning English. One implication of this is that English language development must be an instructional priority. Fair enough, but as students acquire English language skills, they must also have access to comprehensible, meaningful instruction. Instructional modifications might provide ELLs with access to academic content when instruction is primarily in English. In the US we call this "sheltered" instruction; in Europe it's Clil - Content and language integrated learning.

Unfortunately, the research on whether sheltered instruction can help ELLs keep up with English speakers is lacking. These strategies require considerable investments in teacher time and energy. It is critical that we get better data on whether and to what degree they benefit ELLs.

There are many perspectives on how best to promote English language development, but a third convergence suggests that no single model or approach is sufficient. Different perspectives emphasise different sides of issues, such as whether ELD should focus on communication or formal aspects of language. We have little data on what type of ELD instruction is most beneficial for ELLs, and we have essentially no data on long-term effects of various alternatives to ELD.

The best evidence to date suggests that English language development should be taught explicitly during a dedicated language period and that the most effective approach probably incorporates several perspectives. More precise instructional and interactional guidelines elude us at the moment.

The fourth area of convergence concerns the single most controversial topic in this field: teaching children to read in their first language promotes reading achievement in English. Several dozen experiments and reviews of these experiments have shown with considerable clarity that, at least with respect to reading, instruction in the home language makes a positive contribution to students' reading achievement in English. The effects are modest, but they are real.

Primary language instruction thus provides an additional tool that educators can use to help promote at least literacy achievement among ELLs. Of course, not all educators can provide instruction in students' home language. This is one of many reasons we need additional research on how to make English-only instruction as productive as possible.

As educators who care about the future of ELLs, the question we face is whether we can somehow hold the ideology at bay and let other factors - such as data about effectiveness of alternative approaches - play a significant role in determining policies and practices. As appealing as simple answers are - bilingual education, English-only instruction, etc - they are certainly not sufficient. We must acknowledge the complexity of the challenge and be willing to entertain complex

solutions.

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