

How Well Are They Doing?

The Impact of English Immersion for English Learners in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts

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One way to determine whether all-English “immersion” is successful is to examine the progress made by children in the three states that have passed anti-bilingual education measures (California in 1998, Arizona in 1999, and Massachusetts in 2002). Each state administers language examinations for its English learners, allowing us to see how much progress students are making. And in each state, the growth has been, at best, very modest.

California

English learners in California take the CELDT (California English Language Development Test), which has five levels: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, early advanced, and advanced. “Advanced” does not mean native-like competence: “In order to attain the English proficiency level of their native English-speaking peers, further linguistic enhancement and refinement are necessary” (Test Results Interpretation Guide, CELDT). It is only at the “early advanced” level that students begin to be able to use English “as a means for learning in other academic areas.”

The mean gains per year on the CELDT for English Learners in California is between 40% and 80% of one level, as shown in Table I.

Table I. Gains per Year for ESL Students in California

Grade	2002	2003
K - 2	0.75	0.8
3 - 5	0.79	0.79
6 - 8	0.57	0.47
9 -12	0.38	0.43

Source: Jepsen and deAlth (2005)

Arizona

Arizona uses several different tests of oral English, but most English learners take either the IPT or LAS tests. The LAS (Language Assessment Scales) has five levels: 1 = non-English speaker, 2 and 3 = “limited” in English, and 4 and 5 are considered “fluent.” The IPT (IDEA oral proficiency test) has six levels, with only those scoring at the top level considered to be “fluent” in English.

Mahoney, Thompson and MacSwan (2005) examined the progress made in oral English in one year among English learners in Arizona, from 2003 to 2004. The results are similar for both the LAS and IPT. A large percentage of children showed no progress at

all and some even got worse. Of those who improved (from 20 to 45%, depending on the test and age of the student), most moved up only one level.

Table II. Changes in Levels of Oral English after One Year

Change	Grades 1-5		Grades 6-12	
	IPT oral	LAS oral	IPT oral	LAS oral
	18, 506	7562	10, 820	4735
Minus 2	0.20%	0.20%	0.10%	0.70%
Minus 1	7.90%	3.80%	8.30%	6.20%
Zero	63.70%	50.90%	68.90%	72.30%
Plus 1	25.60%	39.70%	21.80%	18.50%
Plus 2	2.60%	5.40%	2.30%	0.90%

Source: Mahoney, Thompson, and MacSwan (2005)

Massachusetts

Massachusetts uses the MEPA (Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment). The MEPA was administered for the first time in fall 2004 and spring 2005. Students in grades 3-12 are tested in reading and writing and all English learners (K-12) are tested in speaking and listening. Overall performance is reported in four categories: beginning, early intermediate, intermediate, and transitioning. Attaining the transitioning stage means that the student is "...a probable candidate for reclassification from current LEP status."

In the spring 2005 administration, it was revealed that only about a half of the English learners who had been in school for three years had reached the transitioning stage.

Table III. Percentage at "Transitioning" in Spring 2005

Grades	At Start	After 1 Year	After 2 Years	After 3 Years
3, 4	3%	10%	30%	59%
5, 6	2%	9%	21%	51%
7, 8	5%	9%	20%	43%

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education (2005)

Conclusions

The measures used in each state are different. Also, although all three states passed anti-bilingual education measures, the percentage of children who remain in bilingual education because of waivers differs among the states. Finally, no valid comparisons between different pedagogical approaches are available, and a precise description of the nature of "English immersion" is lacking.

Nevertheless, it is clear that progress in English in the three states that dropped bilingual education has not been spectacular. Extrapolating from the yearly progress in California and Arizona, it appears that it should take children many years to reach levels in which they are even eligible to be considered for the mainstream.

This paper is based on remarks made to the Texas State Board of Education, February 9, 2006.

References

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Mahoney, K., MacSwan, J., and Thompson, M. 2005. The condition of English Language Learners in Arizona: 2005. In D. Garcia & A. Molnar (Eds.), *The Condition of PreK-12 education in Arizona, 2005*. Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Research Laboratory, Arizona State University. <http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/ae/Report/EPsL-0509-110-AEPI.pdf>.

Massachusetts Department of Education. 2005. *Guidelines for using MEPA results to plan sheltered English immersion (SEI) instructional programming and make classification decisions for limited English proficient (LEP) students*.