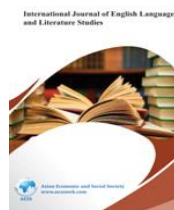




International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies

URL: www.aessweb.com



STRUCTURED ENGLISH IMMERSION: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of the English-only movement in the United States public schools, specifically the Structured English Immersion (SEI) methodology. It discusses the controversy surrounding bilingual education by reviewing theoretical and empirical research about the implementation of SEI. The article articulates that SEI is an appropriate alternative to other bilingual instruction approaches in terms of teaching resources and students' career development.

Keywords: Structured English immersion, English language learners, Literature review.

Received: 10 July 2013 / Revised: 22 August 2013 / Accepted: 29 August 2013 / Published: 10 September 2013

1. INTRODUCTION

For the last 15 years regarding the American school instruction for English language learners (ELL) English-only movement is taking more significant position (Evans and Hornberger, 2005). In 1998, California passed a referendum known as Proposition 227 requiring that ELL students in California public schools be taught English through structured English immersion (SEI) programs, in which ELL students stay for one year as transitional period and then are transitioned to mainstream classrooms (Article 1, Proposition (227)). Following California' Proposition 227, in 2000 Arizona also passed similar initiative known as (Proposition, 203) (Mahoney *et al.*, 2004). Similar act known as Question 2 was also passed in Massachusetts in 2002 (Will and Gómez, 2006).

While diverse reasons may shape the policy context for bilingual education including growing numbers of immigrant students, school budget cut, worsening economic situation and even a negative attitude toward new immigrants (McGroarty, 1992; Olsen, 2009), the trend for monolingual education synchronizes the time when American K-12 public education was evaluated by high-stake achievement tests as mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and U. S. public schools adopted the individual state accountability programs. Current federal policy requires all ELL students participate in these high-stake tests, and students, teachers, and schools are held accountable for test results (Wright, 2005a). Another concern is the high dropout rate of minority

students (Unz and Tuchman, 1997). For example, in 2001 Hispanic students suffered a 27% dropout rate, four times higher than whites and twice higher than African-Americans (U S Department of Education, 2001). Their lower performance is believed to be partly attributed to the primary use of minority students' native language in schools, which also prevents them from better career development in the future (Wiese and Garcia, 2001).

Historically, the argument between bilingual education and English-only education for minority students has been going on for decades without definite settlement (Schmidt, 2000). When the argument is addressed from different perspectives, e.g., historical, political and theoretical (Rossell and Baker, 1996), one may come up with different conclusions. From political viewpoint, proponents of bilingual education argue that the use of minority students' native language in the classroom demonstrates the legitimacy of the language which is protected by the U.S. Constitution (Baron, 1990). Actually the rise of bilingual education in the contemporary times is a part of the legacy of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. Bilingual education is considered as "the institutional recognition of the legitimate demands of minority groups to have a voice in the curriculum, teaching methods, and materials used to educate their children" (McGroarty, 1992). While the proponents of bilingual education embrace linguistic and cultural diversity, they also urge schools to develop minority children's English competence to get them better prepared for economic opportunity (Mitchell *et al.*, 1999). To tackle such delicate issue, laws and policies seldom define the exact meaning of bilingual education or specify how bilingual education should be implemented in U.S. public schools. For example, funded by Bilingual Act of 1968, the Title VII bilingual education programs provided a variety of instructions for ELL students including ESL classes, sheltered English, pullout tutorial as well as native language support in content-area classes (Lam, 1992). It is noticeable that Title VII, the Bilingual Education Act, never required that ELL children be taught in their native language (Fitzgerald, 1995). Another is *Lau v. Nichols*, a landmark case in which Chinese American students claimed they were denied equal educational opportunity because of the limited English proficiency. The U.S. Supreme Court sided with their claim. But the Supreme Court did not make clear recommendations or mandates for the minority students' instruction (Flores and Murillo, 2001).

It is the same scenario when one frames bilingual education theoretically. Based on the threshold hypothesis and independence hypothesis (Cummins, 1980a; 1980b), supporters of bilingual education believe that in order for ELL students to be academically successful, they must attain a threshold level of linguistic competence and their development of English is facilitated by their first language proficiency (Ramirez *et al.*, 1991; Ernst-Slavit, 1998). When deprived of the use of their native language, ELL students feel unable to express freely (Guzman, 2002), and they have to struggle for two learning tasks – English and academic content, either of the two tasks may drag them behind (Lara-Alecio *et al.*, 2004). Proponents of bilingual education also allege that English-only instruction in a mainstream classroom inhibits ELL child's intellectual development and self-esteem (Rossell and Baker, 1996). In terms of the relationship between first and second languages, linguists remain divided about controversial issue of first language's interference or

reinforcement for the acquisition of a second language (Bialystok and Hakuta, 1994). Due to the controversy of the issue, different bilingual teaching models are developed to identify “the extent to which interference and/or reinforcement are operating and the social and educational conditions under which reinforcement rather than interference can be expected to operate” (Mitchell *et al.*, 1999).

Due to the interplay of various factors including those addressed above, the real practice of bilingual programs at U.S. public schools did not reach a consensus that could be generalized (Roberts, 1995). There are as many bilingual teaching models as there are teachers involved in bilingual education (Collier, 2003). Generally speaking, the conventional practice of bilingual education in the U.S. public schools is transitional in nature, which means that ELL students first receive instruction in their native language for several years. After they have gained sufficient English language competency, they are transitioned to mainstream classes (Mora, 2000).

Because bilingual education in U.S. public schools has always been argued for its pros and cons from different perspectives, it is necessary to examine the argument from a broader spectrum. Based on such a wider analysis, I find that some major points are on the side of supporters of SEI. These points include large number of ELL students (5 million) (Parrish *et al.*, 2006), the limited teaching resources and shrinking federal financial support (Guerrero, 1999), the theoretical concepts of linguistic and cognitive development for English as a second language (ESL), empirical research findings and ELL students’ better career prospect. With all the points being considered together, I argue that SEI program is beneficial for ELL students in the long run.

1.1. Structured English Immersion

The concept of structured English immersion was initiated in ESL education in Canada (Baker and de Kanter, 1983). It includes two basic elements: maximized instruction in English and use of English at a level appropriate to ELLs’ English proficiency in the class (Ramirez *et al.*, 1991). SEI was initiated to meet the ‘double-task’ of U.S public schools for ELL students, i.e., English proficiency and mastery of academic disciplines. (Mitchell *et al.*, 1999).

True SEI is not a program that immediately places ELL students to complete English immersion and it attaches importance to teaching English rather than teaching in English (Baker, 1998). In another word, SEI emphasizes explicit teaching of English as a second language instead of learning English through osmosis. The target of SEI program is to help ELLs “possess a foundational understanding of the mechanics, structure, and vocabulary of English that enables him or her to meaningfully access core content” (Clark, 2009). Baker and de Kanter (1983) defined it as "a curriculum... structured so that communication is at a level the child can understand” (p. 11). In the first year ELL students usually receive intensive English instruction (Baker, 1998). One model of successful implementation of SEI is Seattle's Newcomers Program, a teaching approach used in California. ELL students were first placed in "Newcomer Centers" for half a year to one year for intense instruction in English and research showed that the program was significantly effective in helping ELL students move to full participation in mainstream classes (ibid). In such SEI classes,

ELL students' first languages were not strictly forbidden and they were allowed to speak their first language informally among themselves or with their teachers (Ramirez *et al.*, 1991). This is also explicitly stated in the new law. Proposition 203 of Arizona stipulates that the accommodation in the form of primary language support is allowed and "teachers may use a minimal amount of the child's native language when necessary" (Article 3.1, Proposition 203). Theoretically, researchers (e.g., (Huerta-Macias and Quintero, 1992) posited that code switching, i.e., teachers switch between English and students' native language, is helpful to sustain communication and improve instructional effectiveness. The advantage of limited use of students' native language is confirmed empirically. Amaral *et al.* (2002) observed some SEI science classes. The teachers had the freedom to use Spanish to facilitate instruction, including the use of supporting materials translated in Spanish. The students were encouraged to interact in English but allowed to use Spanish, especially for peer assistance. A longitudinal study indicates that students exposed to SEI instruction performed equally well on final science test as those with sufficient English proficiency, though the former group performed significantly lower than the later one at the beginning of the program.

In summary, SEI is a program that first develops ELL students' English competence with the intention for future content learning in mainstream classes. Successful SEI does not completely eliminate the use of students' primary language, though it limits its use formally in the classroom.

1.2. Theoretical Base

The development of first and second languages follows different patterns. First language as mother tongue is naturally developed from infancy without children's conscious intention of learning it (Doughty, 1998). The development of English for ELLs is different in that it is developed at a later time than the first language and the development is distinguished by two approaches, acquisition and learning. Krashen (1999) explains that language acquisition is similar to the way children develop their first language competence. It is a subconscious process because learners are often not aware that they are acquiring a language. On the other hand, language learning is concerned with conscious learning of formal knowledge about the language in terms of grammatical and lexical rules. Both acquisition and learning are essential for ELLs. Acquisition develops learners' fluency in L2 but conscious learning is useful as an editor or monitor, which is applied when L2 learners are "editing their output to make it conform to their conscious rules..." (Krashen, 2002).

Bachman (1990)'s theoretical model about language competence also offers theoretical insight into the nature of language. Bachman points out that language competence includes two major dimensions: organizational and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence includes grammatical and textual knowledge and pragmatic competence is related to language communicative purpose.

Both Krashen and Bachman's theories shed light on the validity of SEI. Because SEI program sets aside one year for conscious learning of English that cannot be replaced by acquisition in English-only environment, it enables ELLs to consciously monitor the output of correct English,

especially academic English, which is a specialized register of language functioning differently in different academic areas such as in math, science, social studies and language arts (Guerrero, 1999). Because of its complexity, academic English needs to be monitored for more accuracy and correction. Effective monitoring depends on understanding of lexical form and grammatical rules (Krashen, 1999).

Bachman's model explains the difference between conversational and academic English. ELLs may be strong in pragmatic competence, skillfully engaging in conversations in English. But they may be weak in organizational competence and unable to structure formal language use according to rules. Teachers as well as parents sometimes hold a misconception that as long as children can speak fluently they are capable of learning content knowledge in mainstream classes without explicit learning of English language. Strang *et al.* (1993) confirmed that teachers and ELL students differed sharply in perceiving English competence. The teachers under study identified 97,000 10th graders in the public schools in California as students with limited English proficiency but the number of 10th graders who labeled themselves as English learners soared up to 256,000. In picking up conversational English, ELL students may take advantage of the context and extra-linguistic information (Krashen, 1999). In the natural English environment without being pushed to learn English intentionally, children are also free from anxiety (Krashen, 1999). The result is that they "overperform" in conversational English, as is evidenced by empirical research. For example, Clark (2009) studied 15 school districts in Arizona and his findings revealed that 60% ELL students who were strong in conversational English lagged behind in academic English for coursework. Therefore, it should be noted that fluency in the hallway does not necessarily mean proficiency in the classroom (Ernst-Slavit, 1998).

1.3. Empirical Studies

The search of database and analysis of empirical studies on SEI delineate a quite complex picture. A straightforward comparison between SEI and other bilingual instructional approaches is virtually impossible to reveal convincing results because of interplay of different variables. Reese *et al.* (2006) compared ELL students' achievement of reading in their primary and English languages from three schools located in three different communities. The first was predominantly Spanish, the second was a mixture of English and Spanish and the third was predominantly English. Analysis of data from survey and interview with parents and principals revealed that no clear-cut decisions could be made about what variable contributed to the students' reading proficiency because what needed to consider included what language the ELL students were exposed to in their home community, what educational levels parents reached, and whether parents could assist their children in English. Because of different variables involved, a large scale evaluation study (Parrish *et al.*, 2006) on the effectiveness of SEI compared with other ELL instructional approaches made a quite ambiguous conclusion. The five-year evaluation study collected data from student achievement, phone interviews, case study, site visits, and written surveys. In spite of the fact that no significant gain of ELL students' grade was found compared

with English native counterparts in different subjects, the evaluation study reported that many educators held a positive view of SEI in its overall effects. The study still recognized SEI as a useful approach and found no positive evidence to support any other instructional approaches for ELL education. The study by [Tong et al. \(2008\)](#) also confirmed that SEI is at least not inferior to other bilingual instructions. In a two-year, field-based, large-scale research on more than 500 Hispanic ELL students in one urban school district in southeastern Texas, the authors compared the students' academic English oral proficiency between transitional bilingual education (TBE), in which students first language was used in literacy and content areas and then transferred to English instruction, and SEI. Data analysis found no significant difference in the growth rates between TBE and SEI. [Sievert \(2007\)](#) also noticed that SEI was at least as powerful as bilingual education (BE). In order to explore the effectiveness of SEI and BE, she compared two states, California and Texas. Both states had large Hispanic population but implemented different instruction for ELLs. California implemented SEI and Texas implemented bilingual education. According to multiple regression analysis, the fourth-grade students (n=40) exposed to either instructive modes showed significant superiority in reading performance. In another study [Russell \(2003\)](#) interviewed several SEI teachers in California who used to teach in bilingual classroom. When asked whether they would go back to teach in bilingual classroom, not a single teacher gave positive response. In their eyes, bilingual education was not practical though it might sound to be politically good.

In two small scale studies conducted before the implementation of SEI, Gersten and his colleagues comparatively studied effectiveness of immersion program similar to SEI and BE and they confirmed the immersion program was superior to bilingual approach. In one study, [Gersten \(1985\)](#) compared two groups of Asian ELL students from either the structured immersion program or the district bilingual classes. The results based on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills indicated the SEI program was effective for the development of academic skills and proficiency in written English. Those from SEI group were significantly higher in reading and math. In another study, [Gersten and Woodward \(1985\)](#) case-studied a program known as Direct Instruction Model, a type of SEI program. Guided by Direct Instruction Model teachers taught academic subjects in English. They first singled out carefully-controlled vocabulary for preview. Students' native language was not completely forbidden in the class. Instead, the teachers and paraeducators clarified concepts and explained difficult words and phrases in students' native language. After three years, the children performed near or above national average in language arts and math on the Metropolitan Achievement Test.

Although no empirical studies after the implementation of SEI in several states definitely confirmed the significant effectiveness of SEI, especially for Hispanic students who live in predominantly Spanish speaking communities, a couple of studies revealed how differently SEI was interpreted and implemented in public schools. [Combs et al. \(2005\)](#) studied the effect of Proposition 203, the SEI program implemented in Arizona. They interviewed teachers, administrators, school staff, parents and students. They noted that teachers felt frustrated and unprepared for the newly-assigned job in SEI classes due to lack of training. Another study by

Wright (2005b) also on the effect of Proposition 203 revealed the same problem. 40 third-grade ELL teachers surveyed came from different school districts across the state in urban, rural, and reservation schools and they complained that they had little or no guidance from the schools or districts regarding how to implement SEI. Almost half of the teachers (45%) reported that the majority of ELLs in their school were placed in mainstream classrooms instead of SEI program. Similar problem was also identified in the implementation of SEI program in California. To assess the effectiveness of Proposition 227, Torrez (2001) surveyed two hundred teachers from five different school districts in Southern California. He found that the schools and districts had no clear concepts and even no clear plans regarding how to implement the new proposition. He contended that the debate over English immersion instruction is misled by political sentiment without enough focus on the research of pedagogy. Two other studies on Proposition 227 also found ambiguity in the implementation and concepts of the SEI program. Based on qualitative data such as interview with district and school administrators, former bilingual coordinators, classroom teachers and parents and class observation, Gutierrez *et al.* (2001) found great difference in understanding and implementation of the new law in the three school districts they studied. Mueller *et al.* (2004) interviewed 15 special education teachers teaching public schools in southern California. Most of the interviewed teachers had little idea of the contents of Proposition 227. The participant teachers also expressed strong need for professional training. In analyzing the implementation of Proposition 227, Rossell (2003) also found that the guidelines issued by the State Board and school districts were inconsistent. For example, SEI program was either redefined as a self-contained ELLs' classroom or mainstream classroom with ESL pullout for ELLs. Some guideline changed maximum of one year in SEI classroom to minimum. In a study focusing on the implementation of Question 2, the law mandating SEI in Massachusetts, Gort *et al.* (2008) examined three school districts by conducting semi-structured interviews with program directors, coordinators and school principals. Their findings indicated that the interpretation of SEI is greatly subject to administrators and principals' personal beliefs, local contexts and previous bilingual programs. The three school districts practiced SEI by associating it with their bilingual educational programs before the new law in different understandings, i.e., "(a) identifying SEI as continued practice, (b) weaving SEI into a bilingual program sequence, and (c) envisioning SEI through a bilingual perspective" (p. 51). The authors concluded that rather than viewing SEI as an entirely English-only program, the three school districts interpreted it through a bilingual lens.

In summary, the implementation of SEI program cannot bring significant effects immediately because as a top-down state law its interpretation and implementation are complicated by factors such as teacher training, administrators' belief and knowledge, local contexts, perspective of policymakers' argument and experience of formal bilingual education. However, SEI is still an option as powerful as other instructional approaches for ELL education. Its effective implementation needs clearly-defined interpretation of the new policy based on sufficient empirical and longitudinal research for successful pedagogical models.

2. DISCUSSION

Controversy emerges ever since the adoption of SEI. In the literature a pile of research papers argued in favor of bilingual education (Cummins and Swain, 1986; Thomas and Collier, 1996; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). But the argument is "more strongly based on political than on pedagogical considerations" (Cummins, 1989). To justify SEI, it is necessary to clarify important points, i.e., educational goals for ELLs, cultural assimilation and school resources. Basically, bilingual education shares most of its goals with SEI. Bilingual education programs have three general goals to accomplish: the teaching of subject matter knowledge, the development of literacy skills, initially in ELL students' first language and then it is transferred to English and the development of communicative language skills in both English and the native language (Eliana and Timothy, 2003). In SEI the only difference is that the knowledge of subject matter is primarily taught in English instead of ELL students' native language. Actually, the claim that Cummins' theory of transferring from L1 and L2 is not empirically evidenced. After reviewing the literature of bilingual education, (Porter, 1990) concluded that no convincing cases of successful bilingual education indicated that ELL students performed better when they were taught in their native language than in English. After examining students' school performance, even researchers (Carter and Chatfield, 1986; Hakuta, 1986) supporting bilingual education raised the question: does bilingual education really work? Bilingual education fails to generate definite outcome in students' performance partly because the essence of bilingual education is an issue involving matters of politics, i.e., the linguistic human rights (Rojas and Reagan, 2003). A typical example of the violation of such rights was the Carlisle Indian School where American Indian children were deprived to speak their native language (Hall *et al.*, 2007).

However, the case of linguistic genocide (Boseker, 1994) for North American Indian children can hardly be applied to all minorities today. Ogbu and Simons (1998) distinguished minority groups into voluntary immigrant minorities and involuntary nonimmigrant minorities. For voluntary minorities groups such as those from East Asian countries, Central and South America and Africa, they immigrated to the United States to seek better jobs or more political or religious freedom. Due to their expectation for more opportunities for American dream, voluntary immigrants are more willing to accommodate and to accept the mainstream language rather than sticking to their native ones and they regard learning a new language as additive that brings more opportunities for success. Because the immigration of involuntary minorities such as African-Americans and early Mexican Americans in the Southwest to the United States was more or less against their will, they didn't truly embrace the mainstream culture and language. Because of the different reasons for the minorities groups to immigrate to the United States, the analysis of bilingual issue should be case sensitive, i.e., grounding a particular case in a particular minority group rather than addressing it uniformly.

Today the debate between bilingual and monolingual education in public schools is primarily concerned with children of new immigrants, who are largely voluntary immigrants seeing "school success as a major route to making it in the United States" (Ogbu and Simons, 1998). Among the

students from the voluntary group, based on relevant empirical articles on ELL education there are two major groups: Hispanic students and other minority students. Hispanic students comprise 80% of ELL students in U.S. schools (August and Shanahan, 2006). Also, the number of Hispanic students who speak a language other than English at home is almost eight times higher than other minorities students combined, i.e., 70% versus 9% (Fry and Gonzales, 2008). Another overwhelmingly big statistic number is that Spanish is spoken as native language by 79% of ELL students while other 460 languages are spoken by the remaining (Kindler, 2002). To successfully implement bilingual education, several points have to be considered: the same native language or dialect shared by all ELL students in the classroom, qualified teachers who are fluent in the students' native language or dialect and published textbooks written in the language (Rossell, 2003). The only minority group that can satisfy the criteria is Hispanic students. Rossel (ibid) mentioned that the Board of Education in New York City issued a memo requiring non-Hispanic ELL students should receive the same bilingual instruction as Hispanic counterparts but regarding the availability of non-Hispanic bilingual teachers and textbooks in various ELL students' languages, no federal and state documents mentioned a word for it. Roberts (1995) posited that bilingual education is a generous but not affordable attempt to help ELL students. Take Gersten (1985)'s study mentioned earlier as an example, the school the author selected for research had Asian students from eight countries speaking eight different languages. To consider the issue nationwide, when more than 425 first languages spoken by immigrant students in the United States (Flannery (2006), the instruction in each of the minority languages doesn't make sense in such a situation. Thus, after reviewing the bilingual education in New York public schools, Rossell (2003) concluded that in essence bilingual education is an implementable program only for Hispanic students while for other minorities groups, especially Asian immigrant children who did more successfully in schools, were entirely taught in English. Even for Hispanic students, real bilingual instruction is not guaranteed due to the shortage of qualified teachers. In referring to a 1993 U.S. Department of Education report, Figueroa and Garcia (1994) concluded that only a small proportion of bilingual education teachers possessed native or near-native academic Spanish language proficiency. Because of the shortage of bilingual teachers and funding, before Arizona passed Proposition 203, the act of SEI, more than 70% of ELL students were already studying in mainstream classes which were taught only in English (Wright, 2005b). It is the same case in California, where also 70% of ELL students received English-only instruction (Olsen, 2009). Nationwide, it is estimated that 85% of the ELL students in the United States public schools were not involved in any programs specifically designed for language-minority learners (Garcia *et al.*, 1993). U.S. Department of Education Office of Policy and Planning (1993) reported that only 17 percent of the schools serving language minority students provided a significant degree of primary language instruction. For those who were teaching in bilingual classes, only 10 percent of teachers were certified in bilingual education (August and Hakuta, 1998). In contrast to this small number of certified bilingual teachers, a national survey reported that 54% of public school teachers had ELL students in their classrooms but only 20% of teachers felt ready to teach them (National Center for

Education Statistics, 1999). Another matter facing schools is departmentalization at later grades when different subjects are taught by different teachers. Because of this, most bilingual programs in the United States are constrained in elementary schools and are usually early-exit (K-3) programs aiming for the development of English language proficiency (August and Hakuta, 1997). Considering the limited resources in bilingual education, the shared goals between SEI and other bilingual educational models, and the findings that SEI is at least not inferior to other models in ELL education (Parrish *et al.*, 2006; Tong *et al.*, 2008), policymakers and school administrators should know better which program brings the most beneficial results.

3. CONCLUSION

Language is a symbolic instrument that carries meanings. The meaning of content knowledge will not be lost no matter in what language it is represented. Theoretically and practically speaking, SEI program is a useful option for ELL instruction with the advantage of helping ever growing number of ELL students more quickly remove the linguistic barrier to learning academic subjects in English with less human and financial resources so that the minority students can enter the mainstream society with more promising perspective.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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