



Does Reading Approach Matter in Two-Way Immersion Programs?¹

*Barbara D. Acosta, Ph.D., Center for Language and Culture,
College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University*

A growing number of English language learners (ELLs) in our nation's schools struggle to learn English while they keep up with school work, facing an arduous path to attaining the educational goals necessary for later social and economic stability as adults. Among the language minority population, Spanish speakers tend to fare particularly poorly. This group is more likely to be retained in grade and less likely to complete high school or to enroll in or complete college than European American native English speakers (NCES, 2004). As a result, they are more likely to receive the label of "at-risk" of failure, a label that, I will argue here, erroneously places the locus of potential failure on the students rather than on the educational system that is failing them.

The achievement gap between ELLs and white, English-speaking students has received increasing attention, as school districts are now being held accountable for assuring that this subgroup reaches adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals under No Child Left Behind. Reading achievement is of particular concern, given its relationship to nearly every other achievement measure.

Meanwhile, current federal policy mandates a limited set of reading instructional approaches based on restricted definitions of literacy (Gutiérrez et al., 2002). Relying on evidence cited by the National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) numerous researchers (e.g., Adams, 1999; Goswami, 2000; Lyon, 1998) have proposed the widespread implementation of early literacy interventions with a strong emphasis on direct instruction of skills. In a 1998 report by Reid Lyon, for example, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development recommended that "at-risk" readers receive "highly direct and systematic instruction to develop phoneme awareness and phonics skills," (p. 5) in order to prevent deficits in reading fluency and comprehension. The research literature reviewed by the NRP was conducted primarily with monolingual English speakers, however. Some researchers (Au, 2000; Pérez, 1998; Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo, & Arzubiaga, 2001) have suggested that culturally and linguistically diverse students and children who are learning to read in bilingual settings may need a broader, more socioculturally oriented approach to reading instruction.

Two-way immersion (TWI) programs differ from other kinds of language support programs for ELLs in several important ways. Because they are designed to meet the needs of two language groups – native English speakers learning the target language, and target language speakers learning English – TWI programs represent one of the few models that integrate ELLs together in the same classrooms with their English-speaking peers. Furthermore, because instruction is provided through

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both languages, both groups have an opportunity to build on what they know in their first language to learn challenging academic subject matter through a second language. The ultimate goals of TWI programs also differ profoundly from other programs that focus primarily on English development alone: to develop full proficiency in two languages, to promote literacy and high academic achievement for all subject areas in both languages, and to develop positive attitudes among groups and toward other cultures (Christian, Howard, & Loeb, 2000).

TWI programs have shown a great deal of promise for increasing ELL school success (Cazabon, Nicoladis, & Lambert, 1998; Christian, Montone, Lindholm, & Carranza, 1997; Cummins, 2000; Lindholm-Leary, 2001), producing some of the strongest academic outcomes compared with more traditional language support programs for ELLs (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002). Although overall TWI programs have demonstrated high average outcomes, Thomas (personal communication, December 18, 2003) observed that results varied widely across schools and programs. In comparison, other language support programs produced “consistently poor” outcomes. Why might some TWI programs do better than others? Could factors related to the specific literacy practices within the programs account for these variable outcomes? The purpose of this study was to examine how literacy was taught in the early grades of well-established TWI programs², and to determine whether specific literacy approaches and practices made a difference in students’ upper grade reading achievement.

Research Design

The study took place in five elementary two-way Spanish-English immersion programs in the Houston Independent School District. Staff in all of the K-5 programs had agreed to follow the school district’s 90:10 program guidelines, meaning that students, including both native English speakers and native Spanish speakers, received initial literacy instruction in Spanish in the early grades from K-3. English-medium instruction was introduced in Kindergarten for 30 minutes a day, with a primary emphasis on oral language development and subject matter content. Instruction in English gradually increased to approximately half of instructional time by Grade 3, but formal reading instruction in English did not begin until Grade 5. Beginning in Grade 1, students in TWI were tested each year on nationally-normed, standardized tests of reading, language arts and math, and beginning in Grade 3, on the Texas state assessment in these subjects as well. The state requires that all accountability tests be administered in the language of instruction. Test scores for the current study were thus available in Spanish Reading for Grades 1-4 and English Reading for Grades 5-6 (the highest grade levels attained by students in this sample).

The student sample was selected from 482 children in four cohorts who had attended one of the five sample schools during the years 1996-97 to 2002-03. In order to hold the program effect constant, only those students who had been enrolled in the TWI for all four of the early grade levels from K – 3 were selected. The final sample consisted of 258 students, of whom 168 were native Spanish speakers and 41 were native English speakers. Because 98 percent of the native Spanish speakers were classified on entry to school as limited English proficient and 100 percent of this group lived in impoverished households³, all of these students were, by school district definition, considered “at-risk” of failure. Eight percent of the native English speakers were also designated “at-risk” based on other academic, behavioral, or socioeconomic factors.

² Well-established TWI programs were identified by Central Office staff as programs that had at least seven years of reliable implementation of the model.

³ Poverty level was measured by the number of students who received free and reduced lunch.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected retrospectively for school years 1996-97 to 2002-03. A teacher survey was administered to 57 teachers who had taught Spanish reading and writing in the program in Grades K-3 for one or more of the study years. In addition, 25 teachers participated in in-depth interviews to talk about their practices. Outcome data consisted of reading scores on the Aprenda (the Spanish version of the Stanford-9) for Grades 1-4, the English version of the Stanford-9 for Grades 5-6, and the Texas state accountability exams in either Spanish or English starting at Grade 3. Scores were adjusted for prior differences in oral language proficiency on the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) at entry to Kindergarten.

Summary of Findings

Literacy Instructional Approaches

Three literacy instructional approaches were implemented in Grades K-3 in the sample schools. Thirty-seven percent of students in the sample received reading instruction through the Success for All (SFA) approach, 36 percent received the school district-designed “Balanced Approach to Reading” (Project BAR), and the remaining 27 percent received either an “eclectic” or “whole language” approach⁴. This third category consisted of students whose teachers reported using a “variety of methods of my own selection” as well as teachers who said they used a “mostly literature-based” approach. Most of the teachers reporting the eclectic/whole language approaches did so prior to the 2000-01 school year, when Project BAR was introduced throughout the school district. At that time, most of the sample classrooms except for those in one SFA school converted to Project BAR.

Both SFA and BAR described themselves as research-based. These two approaches included intensive professional development for teachers, and provided a “scientifically-based” (National Reading Panel, 2000) combination of literacy instructional practices to promote the development of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, spelling and comprehension. Success for All differed from Project BAR in its use of a scripted approach which required teachers to follow its program manual verbatim, to adhere strictly to preset time limitations for each instructional activity, and to rely primarily on SFA-developed materials. It also placed a strong emphasis on cooperative learning and thematic units. Project BAR, on the other hand, permitted a good degree of teacher flexibility, accompanied by ample instructional guidance through the school district curriculum and its adopted textbooks. The well-developed curricula associated with SFA and Project BAR were perceived by many teachers and administrators as an improvement over earlier years in which some teachers who reported using the eclectic or whole language approach said that they received little guidance from the school district and often felt unsure about instructional decisions. Comparing Project BAR with the former reading curriculum, one teacher, for example, reported that under the Balanced Approach to Reading, “I knew what was expected. For me this has worked very well [because] I was no longer guessing [what the objectives meant].”

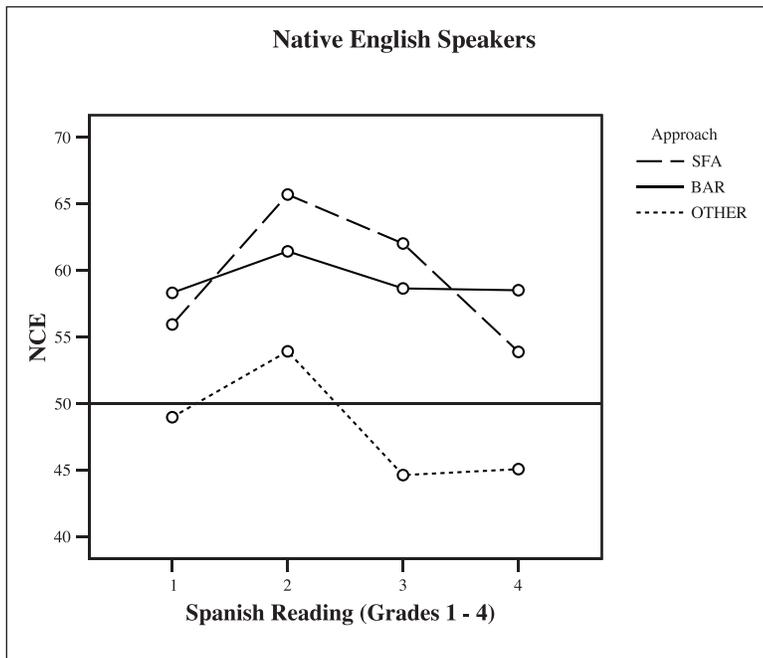
Reading Outcomes

Reading achievement results indicated that the literacy instructional approach implemented in the early grades did make a difference. However, outcomes differed somewhat for each language

⁴ The latter two groups were combined because there were not enough students in the “whole language” approach to analyze separately.

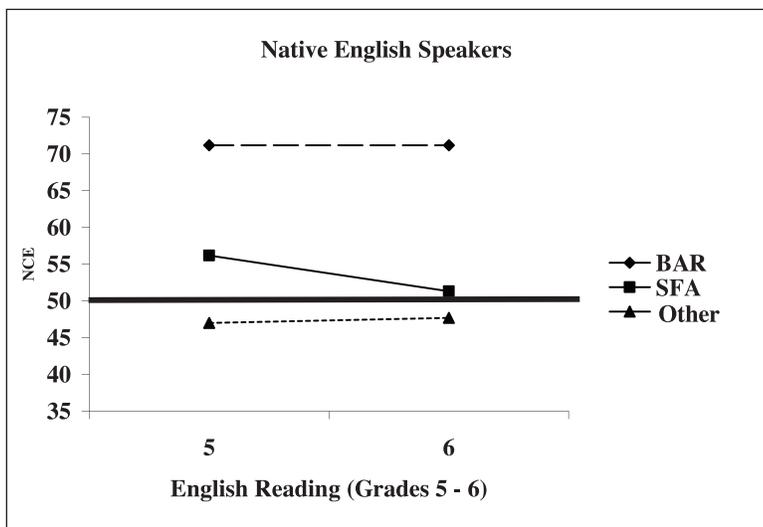
group. For Native English speakers (NES), there was no meaningful difference in Spanish reading achievement between students who had received SFA or Project BAR at Grades 1-3, but at Grade 4, those NES who had been enrolled in Project BAR classrooms outscored their same-language peers who had been enrolled in SFA by 7 normal curve equivalents (NCEs) (See Figure 1 on next page).

Figure 1



4, those NES who had been enrolled in Project BAR classrooms outscored their same-language peers who had been enrolled in SFA by 7 normal curve equivalents (NCEs) (See Figure 1 on next page). (Thomas and Collier [2001] suggest that a difference of 3-4 NCEs is considered important.) Four native English speakers who had been enrolled in eclectic/whole language approaches scored substantially lower than their peers across all grade levels, but there were not enough students in this group to form a meaningful comparison. For English reading, native English speakers who had been enrolled in Project BAR considerably outscored their English-speaking peers in the other two approaches across Grades 5 and 6, when the accountability tests switched to English, with a large difference of 18 and 24 NCEs, respectively, but the sample was too small from which to generalize (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



For native Spanish speakers (NSS), data for Spanish reading indicated that students in all three approaches scored above grade level⁵ across Grades 1-4, but students who had been exposed to eclectic/whole language approaches tended to score 6-7 NCEs lower than their peers in SFA, with no significant difference between SFA and BAR (see Figure 3 on next page). The strongest difference for native Spanish speakers

was found for upper grade English reading. Former limited English proficient students who had received Project BAR performed at grade level norms by attaining close to the 50th percentile at Grade 5 (when they were tested in English for the first time)—effectively closing the achievement gap at least one year earlier than their Spanish-speaking peers who had been enrolled in either Success for All or eclectic/whole language approaches (see Figure 4 on next page).

⁵ “Grade level norms” on norm-referenced, standardized tests are defined as the 50th NCE, which is equal to the 50th percentile.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is important to note that overall, students from both language groups in all five of the TWI schools in this study performed well academically. Native English speakers in all but the eclectic/whole language group scored on or above grade level in reading in both languages. Spanish-speaking students in all three reading approaches attained high achievement in their native language and ultimately reached grade level in their second language within five to seven years, a phenomenal achievement considering national statistics on the persistence of the reading achievement gap with native English-speaking students (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997).

That said, the choice of literacy instructional approach for TWI students did make a difference in outcomes. Overall, across the elementary grades, both SFA and Project BAR appeared to produce superior reading achievement in each language compared with the third group of eclectic/whole language classrooms. This would suggest what would appear to be an obvious conclusion -- that a systematic, well-balanced instructional program integrating strong, research-based instructional principles and a clear rationale is preferable to one in which little instructional guidance is provided.

But a comparison of outcomes between SFA and Project BAR provides opportunities for additional reflection. Why were the strong outcomes for students in the elementary-level Success for All classrooms not sustained as they moved into the upper grades and began testing in English? McCarthy and Dressman (2000) suggest that the goals of scripted programs such as Success for All compete with the goals of other approaches that emphasize instructional flexibility and teacher autonomy. Furthermore, they suggest that the underlying theory and goals of a particular program determine to a significant extent the outcomes that will ultimately be attained.

Figure 3

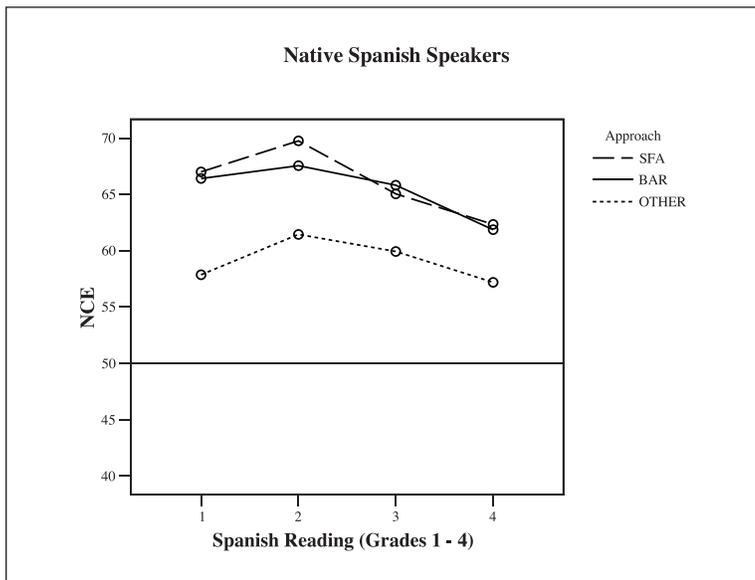
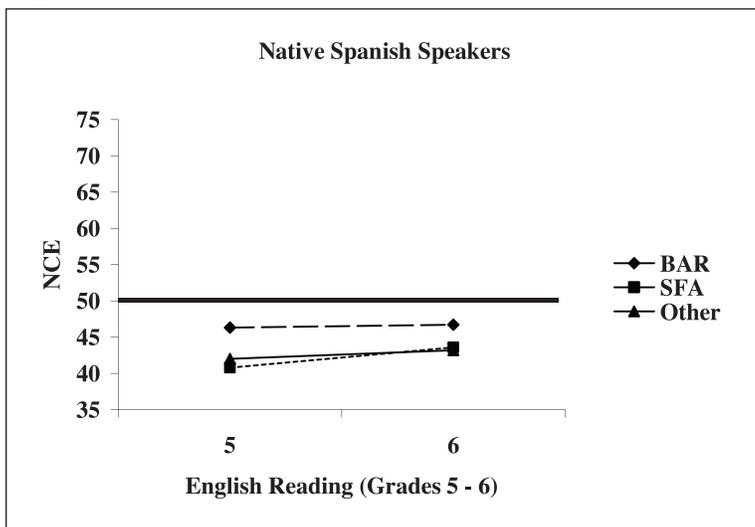


Figure 4



The strong emphasis in SFA on both direct instruction of skills and on test preparation may help explain the consistently high performance on primary grade assessments of reading in this and previous studies (e.g., Borman et al., 2005; Slavin & Calderon, 2000), when tests tend to focus on the fundamental skills of reading and decoding. But the program's rigid implementation of highly controlled instructional practices implies a great cost in terms of loss of teacher autonomy, the ability to respond to the diverse needs of students, and students' direct agency in their own reading development (Dressman, 1999; MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, & Palma, 2004; Ryder, 2003). SFA thus failed to predict the same high achievement in the upper grades, as students encountered reading tests in a language that differed from the initial language of instruction and as assessments simultaneously moved beyond measures of learning to read and toward evaluating students' ability to read for learning.

In conclusion, schools must be careful not to overemphasize some goals (such as a narrow focus on decoding, word reading, and lower level comprehension skills) at the expense of others (such as promoting literacies in multiple languages, and providing an integrated response to the needs of second language learners). Finally, the sequestering of teacher autonomy seems characteristic of remedial programs intended to "fix" deficits in both teachers and students. This underlying belief of highly scripted programs contradicts the philosophy of TWI, because the nature of an enriched, academic bilingual program challenges the notion of ELLs as "at-risk" of school failure. As the current study has demonstrated, the high achievement of ELLs who are provided with effective instruction and integrated learning environments within strong dual language immersion programs counters the assumption that the locus of failure lies within the child rather than the academic program.

Findings from this research study support the conclusion that the current federal focus on "scientifically-based" reading instruction needs to be broadened to include the literature on what is effective for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Immersion educators who understand these issues can play an important role in challenging the pressures to conform to narrow definitions of literacy. TWI professional staff are generally aware that there is no one best approach to reading instruction. It is, however, important that instruction be based on a coherent conceptual framework and a principled set of practices (Stahl & Hayes, 1997) that can address the needs of diverse students. Reading approaches for TWI programs should be consistent with TWI goals, and need to move beyond a year-to-year approach to meeting adequate yearly progress toward longer-term goals for linguistic, academic, social and cultural development. Finally, decisions regarding how and to what extent specific reading skills are taught are best left up to the professional judgment of well-prepared teachers who understand instructional issues for culturally and linguistically diverse students, rather than relying on rigid instructional scripts.

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