Myths about bilingualism and bilingual education: Repercussions for education policy

Ilana Umansky
Prevalent myths that have informed policy
If you try to learn two languages, you won’t learn either well.
"English for the Children" laws

- California (Proposition 227; 1998)
- Arizona (Proposition 203; 2000)
- Massachusetts (Question 2; 2002)
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From Parrish, 2006
You need to be proficient in English before you can learn academic content.
Arizona’s structured English immersion model

House Bill 2064, 2006

Integration of the 4 time blocks for first year ELLs and all ELLs below the intermediate proficiency level

Elementary and self-contained middle schools may provide the following services to first year ELLs and all ELLs below the intermediate proficiency level:

1. ELD instruction using the English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards during two “blocks”, totaling 4 hours:
   a. Block 1: 120 minutes of integrated reading, oral English conversation and vocabulary
   b. Block 2: 120 minutes of integrated writing and grammar

2. Up to 30 minutes of literacy intervention services with non-ELL students that may count towards the 4-hour requirement if those services meet the instructional needs of the ELL student.

Intermediate Level ELLs in at least their 2nd year

Elementary and self-contained middle schools may integrate required instructional domains and reduce, up to 1 hour, the time required within the SEI Models for ELLs who:

- Demonstrate overall proficiency at the intermediate level on the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA), and
- Are in at least their 2nd year of English language development (ELD) instruction.

For those ELLs for whom flexibility is appropriate, ELD instruction using ELP standards may be delivered during two “blocks”, totaling 3 hours:

1. Block 1: 90 minutes of integrated writing and grammar
2. Block 2: 90 minutes of integrated reading, oral English conversation and vocabulary
Arizona’s structured English immersion model

- Students were unable to exit 4-hour ELD block in one year
- Students were unable to accumulate credits required for graduation while in ELD block
- Students often failed academic classes after exiting ELD block due to lack of academic preparation

House Bill 2064, 2006

Karen et al., 2010

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What does research tell us about the accuracy of these myths?
If you try to learn two languages, you won’t learn either well.
Over time, more students in bilingual programs successfully learn English compared to those in English-only programs.
You need to be proficient in English before you can learn academic content.
EL-classified students learn more when they have more access to academic instruction.

Relationship of Language Arts Achievement to Number of Language Arts Classes Taken, among ELs

Proportion reaching benchmarks

Relationship of Writing Content Coverage to Language Arts Achievement, among 6th Grade English Learners

Aguirre-Muñoz & Boscardin, 2008

Level of content coverage

[work in progress]
Policy shifts that are grounded in research
AZ’s 4-hour ELD block unanimously overturned in 2019

Senate Bill 1014, 2019

Arizona To Offer New Flexibility to English Learners

By Amaya Garcia
Feb. 12, 2019

Superintendent Hoffman Applauds Passing of English Learner Bill

Arizona's 4-hour ELD block was overturned in 2019, providing new flexibility for English learners. The change was supported by Superintendent Hoffman, who applauded the decision. The passage of the bill was seen as a step towards improving education for all students, especially those learning English.
California Multilingual Education Act, 2016

- Repealed bilingual education ban
- Authorizes districts to establish bilingual and dual immersion programs for ELs and non-ELs
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What might proactive policies look like that are grounded in research and understanding?