

# THE ASTOUNDING EFFECTIVENESS OF DUAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR ALL

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How long does it take to learn English? How long should students receive support in language? The most comprehensive work done in this field was conducted by Collier and Thomas. They studied the language acquisition of 700,000 English language learners in a longitudinal study from 1982-1996. They wanted to find out how long it took students with no background in English to reach native speaker performance (50<sup>th</sup> percentile) on norm-referenced tests. In addition they looked at variables such as socioeconomic status, first language, programs used to learn English and number of years of primary language schooling. Below is what they found:

The most significant variable in how long it takes to learn English is the amount of formal schooling students have received in their first language.

Those students between 8-11 years old and had 2-3 years of native language education took 5-7 years to test at grade level in English. These were the lucky ones.

Students with little or no formal schooling, who arrived before the age of eight, took 7-10 years to reach grade level norms in English language literacy.

Students who were below grade level in native language literacy also took 7-10 years to reach the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. Many of these students never reached grade level norms.

This data holds true regardless of the home language, country of origin, and socioeconomic status.

English language learners receiving ESL services DO NOT make more rapid progress in English than students in other types of programs.

English language learners who received all of their schooling in English did extremely well in kindergarten through third grade. The gains these students made in English were dramatic.

However, from 4<sup>th</sup> grade through high school, when the academic demand of the curriculum become more rigorous, the performance of these students fell substantially below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile

Why did this happen? Native English speakers make an average gain of 10 months each school year. However, EL learners only made a 6-8 month gain per school year. The gap between native-English and second language speakers widened from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade through high school. The language spoken had no influence on the results.

Students in Two-Way Bilingual Immersion and Developmental Bilingual programs reach the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile in both their native language and English by 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade in all subject areas. These students were able to sustain the gains made in English and in some cases, to achieve even higher than typical Native-English-Speaker performance as they move through the secondary years of school.

## What Does this Research Mean for Schools?

Bilingual programs are not always feasible, especially in school districts where students come from multiple language backgrounds. Here are the key considerations for school districts.

Give students more time to develop English language academic skills. Don't rush kindergarten through third grade students through your language support programs.

Provide more support services to under-schooled upper elementary and middle school students. Remember that it will take these students 7-10 years to reach grade level

Maintenance of native language in the home should be encouraged. Development of native language literacy should be fostered. Encourage parents to send their children to after-school and Saturday instruction in first language.

This does not mean that all bilingual programs are more effective than all ESL or sheltered content programs. It is important to look beyond the program label. Are teachers qualified to teach English language learners? Are there sufficient materials? What instructional methods are used? Are students exited into all English programs too quickly?