

In the Aftermath of the Storm: English Learners in the Post-227 Era

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Abstract

In 1998, California passed a voter initiative—Proposition 227—that severely restricted the use of primary language for instructional purposes, and instead provided a transitional program of “structured English immersion” that was not normally to last more than one year. Now more than two years after the passage of Proposition 227, the pundits and the policymakers are anxiously making pronouncements about its effects on California’s English learners. However, the numerous reform efforts underway in California, and the limitations of existing data, make it impossible to draw conclusions about the independent effects of the passage of Proposition 227 on the academic achievement of English learners. Contrary to the political statements and shoot-from-the-hip analyses being touted in the press, the achievement scores of California’s English learners yield little evidence of long term benefits for these students.

In 1998, California became a battleground for a national movement to abolish all native language instruction by mandating that English learners be taught in English-only classrooms. The movement in California took the form of a voter initiative—Proposition 227—that severely restricted the use of primary language for instructional purposes, and instead provided for a transitional program of “structured English immersion” that was not normally to last more than one year. Structured English immersion classrooms were defined in the law as multi-age classes with students at the same level of English proficiency in which the focus of instruction was to be the development of English language skills. The only exception to the English-only mandate was to be in the case in which parents sought a specific waiver from the program for their children. According to Proposition 227, waivers could be allowed based on one of three conditions: (a) the child already knew English, (b) the child was over 10 years of age and school staff believed that another approach might be better suited to the student, or (c) school staff determined that the child had special needs that could be better met in an alternate program.

The initiative was approved by voters in June 1998 and schools were required to implement it in the opening days of the 1998-99 school year. For many districts, this meant that only about 60 days were available to prepare for this policy implementation. Thus, it was not surprising that, with little guidance from the state, districts responded to the mandate in highly variable ways. The single best predictor of how a district would respond, however,

was the policy that the district had in place prior to the passage of Proposition 227. Districts that had relied on a largely English-only strategy for educating their English learners tended to abandon dual language instruction altogether and adhere closely to a conservative interpretation of the new law. Districts that had a strong commitment to the idea of bilingual instruction, and a corps of qualified bilingual teachers, were much more likely to help parents seek waivers from English-only instruction. Predictably, the greatest variability occurred in those districts where pre-227 policy had been ambivalent and/or there were insufficient numbers of qualified bilingual teachers to mount a consistent program (Gándara et al., 2000).

Post Proposition 227 Testing Outcomes

Now more than two years after the passage of Proposition 227, the pundits and the policymakers are anxiously making pronouncements about its effects on California's English learners. Ron Unz, the author of the initiative, and his colleagues have declared it a success on the basis that the redesignation rates from limited English proficient (LEP) to fluent English proficiency (FEP) increased from 7 to 7.6% in the year following implementation. They also note that standardized test scores are up for LEP students across the state. However, this is scant evidence on which to claim success. Proposition 227 was based on a contention by its author that LEP students normally should need no more than one year of English instruction in order to join the mainstream, suggesting that all but a few students should be redesignated to FEP status at the end of one year. A less than one percentage point increase would appear to fall far short of this goal. Moreover, while test scores did, indeed, increase for LEP students, they increased for students in bilingual classrooms as well as those in English-only classrooms. Moreover, they also increased for English-only speakers. An increase in test scores was predictable, since simple familiarity with the standardized test normally confers small year-to-year gains (Hakuta, 1999).

Unfortunately, based on existing data, it is not really possible to determine under what conditions LEP students have shown the greatest gains since the state has not yet conducted any cohort analyses of student achievement. That is, no controlled studies have been conducted in which the same children are followed over time, comparing those in different programs. Existing data on program placement are also very difficult to interpret because, as has been noted in numerous studies of bilingual education, it is impossible to know what students are actually being exposed to under the title of "bilingual" or "structured English immersion" without doing careful observation in the classroom. A couple of statistics, however, point to troublesome findings in the test score data.

In 1998, at the end of the first year of implementation of Proposition 227, 15% of second-grade LEP students were found to be performing at or above

the 50th percentile in English reading on the statewide exam. By 2000, 25% of the second-grade LEP students were performing at this level. This fact was touted as evidence for the exceptional improvement of English learners under the new law (Martineau, 2000). However, the definition of LEP in California is a child who does not understand sufficient English to pass a test of oral proficiency and *who does not score above the 35th to 40th percentile on an English standardized test*. Thus, one must pose the question: How could such a large percentage of allegedly LEP students be performing at such a high level on a test in English? If students were making such dramatic gains in one year, we would expect to see very large percentages of children being reclassified as fluent English proficient. But this has not been the case. Unfortunately, looking at the numbers of students tested annually by grade level only compounds the conundrum. In 1998, approximately 231,000 second graders were tested as LEP students. One year later, a little more than 265,000 third graders were tested as LEP students. In other words, instead of reclassifying large percentages of LEP students to FEP status after one year, the cohort of LEP students had grown by almost 13%. But so had the percentage of students who were testing outside of the LEP range (above 50th percentile), from 15% to 19%.

Attempting to determine how well LEP students are faring as a result of their performance on a test that, by definition, they are not supposed to understand would seem not to be the best basis on which to make judgments about students' academic achievement. However, mathematics performance, being somewhat less language bound than reading, may provide a fairer picture of students' progress. In 1998, an average of 49.6% of all English-speaking students were performing at or above the 50th percentile in mathematics. Two years later this figure had grown to 58.6%, an increase of nine percentage points. On the other hand, in 1998, 18% of all LEP students were performing at this level, and this had grown to 25.5% by 2000. The discrepancies between groups are large—English speakers are more than twice as likely to be performing at the 50th percentile in mathematics, but perhaps more troubling, the gains for the LEP students were smaller than for English speakers, with only 7.5% more students meeting or exceeding this criterion. Thus, while there may be reason to celebrate the gains for all students, if this trend continues, the already huge gap between English speakers and English learners will continue to widen.

The Impact of Proposition 227 and Other Reforms on California Education

So, what has been the impact of the passage of Proposition 227 on California's classrooms? In some ways the impact has been relatively modest—in many school districts program offerings actually changed relatively little—but in other ways, most specifically on classroom instruction, the impact

appears to have been great. All of this is moderated, however, by the fact that California has been in the midst of massive reform efforts over the last several years that have made it extremely difficult to separate the impact of one reform from another. A major theme in the implementation of Proposition 227 is the extent to which it has been affected by other school reform efforts. Proposition 227 was enacted in what has been the most active period of education reform in recent times. During the same period class size reduction was expanded to include all of the primary grades. Prior to 1996, California had the largest class sizes in the nation; now in the early grades it has among the lowest. But this has created an enormous demand for new teachers that the state has been unable to meet adequately, resulting in a disproportionately high number of underqualified teachers in classrooms for LEP students (Shields et al., 1999). Sweeping new curricular standards have also been introduced into the schools during this period, changing both content and pedagogy in reading and mathematics. And the statewide testing program was implemented in the same year that Proposition 227 was enacted. Importantly, the statewide test was tied to a host of rewards and sanctions for schools, teachers, and students. Schools and teachers could receive bonuses based on increased test scores, and new restrictions against social promotion meant that students who did not do well on the test would be held back. Moreover, all students who had been in school in California for 12 months, regardless of their language proficiency, were required to take the exam.

The Impact of Proposition 227 on Instructional Services

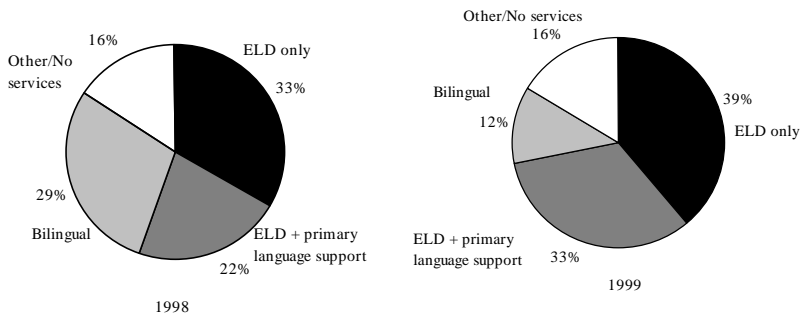
The passage of Proposition 227 resulted in a dramatic drop in the numbers of students being served in bilingual classrooms, but it did not result in the total elimination of bilingual education that had been predicted by the press and the backers of the proposition. Whereas in 1997-98, 29% of English learners were assigned to bilingual classrooms, in 1998-99 only 12% of all English learners were in these classes. Although the proposition had proposed stringent criteria for allowing exceptions to the placement of English learners in “structured English immersion classrooms,” in October 1998 the state board of education ruled that all “parental exception waivers shall be granted unless the school principal and educational staff have determined that an alternative program offered at the school would not be better suited for the overall educational development of the student.”¹ Thus, the board clarification shifted the burden of proof from parents seeking the waiver to those who would deny the waiver, resulting in a small, but significant, number of students remaining in bilingual classrooms.

At the same time, the percentage of students receiving English-only instruction grew from 33 to 39%, a relatively minor shift. However, the category that expanded the most to accommodate the change in policy was that of English language development (ELD) with primary language support² (see Figure 1). In other words, many classrooms utilize some primary language

with students, although the extent and manner in which this happens varies greatly from classroom to classroom. It is sometimes difficult to interpret the meaning of the change in the numbers of students officially assigned to one program or another because those numbers may obscure more than they reveal. For example, some schools and districts complied with Proposition 227 by creating their own definitions of terms such as “overwhelmingly in English.” Thus, students in structured English immersion classrooms might have been provided with 52% of their instruction in English, meeting their own definition of “overwhelming.” Another strategy was to provide “pre-instructional activities” and “review sessions” in the primary language, reserving the actual instructional time for English only. An administrator in one large district described the challenge of defining “overwhelmingly in English” in a way that met legal, but not necessarily instructional, objectives:

[T]he state board of education has allowed districts in California to interpret that based on their own criteria as long as it is overwhelmingly in English. And so the district has determined that 60% of the time you have to teach in English, and 40% in Spanish or whatever it is. 60-40, 70-30, 80-20, 90-10, I’ve heard it all. And it all adds up to the point now that districts in California are forced to come up with a working definition based on the legal interpretations, not based on the instructional needs of the child. (Gándara et al., 2000, p. 18)

Figure 1. Instructional services for English language learners before and after Proposition 227



Note: Rumberger, R., & Gándara, P. (2000). The schooling of English learners. In Burr, E., Hayward, G., Fuller, B., & Kirst, M. (Eds.) *Crucial issues in California Education*. Berkeley & Stanford: University of California and Stanford University, Policy Analysis for California Education.

Perhaps more important than the titles of the programs to which students were assigned in the aftermath of Proposition 227 was the instruction that occurred inside those classrooms. A team of University of California researchers looked at the effects of Proposition 227 in 16 districts and 25 schools during the initial months of implementation. Urban, rural, and suburban

K-8 and unified districts were included in the study, as were very large and very small districts. Most of the 10 largest districts in the state were also included. Some of the districts had a history of strong support for primary language instruction and had extensive primary language programs before Proposition 227; others had relied heavily on English-only programs. Beginning in the fall of 1998, the teams interviewed administrators charged with the policy implementation at each district, and then followed up with interviews of principals, teachers, and bilingual coordinators in key schools within these districts. Classroom observations were also conducted in most of these schools. One of the primary findings of this study was the extent to which teachers in all kinds of classrooms that served English learners were modifying instruction to focus on English test items like those they envisioned would be included on the statewide standardized test. Bilingual and English-only teachers alike professed to be extremely concerned about how their students would fare on the tests since so many rewards and sanctions were attached to them.

The Impact of Proposition 227 on Classroom Pedagogy

Based on our observations (see Gándara et al., 2000), we concluded that the greatest impact of Proposition 227 was on actual classroom instruction. Teachers of English learners, whether they had previously adhered to an English-only curriculum or were full bilingual teachers, had much to say about how they had altered their practices to accommodate the new law. However, at the level of classroom instruction, much more was operating than Proposition 227. Teachers were grappling with new standards, and especially with the new statewide testing. The convergence of these mandates left many in a quandary about how to approach their teaching. The confusion about how to interpret the law also left many teachers feeling vulnerable to sanctions for failing to interpret the law correctly. One teacher in a large suburban district talked about feeling that she had “no protection” if she did not “produce” students who met the new standards, thinking that she could be “out of a job.” She also noted that students who did not speak English would “always score below students who were English speakers” and so she felt she was in a Catch-22 situation. Other teachers noted similar anxieties:

And then also . . . all the pressure . . . the testing, the assessment. I’ve spent more time assessing than teaching this year, and on top of that everybody’s been complaining about that. That’s why the talk of strike . . . and all the uproar with the teachers. And on top of that we have the 227 down our backs, so it’s been an extremely stressful year, to say the least.

In the schools in which we observed, we found that English-only testing was having an extraordinary impact on the instruction that English learners were receiving. Often teachers told us that they did not feel good about what they were doing—leapfrogging much of the normal literacy instruction to go

directly to English word recognition or phonics bereft of meaning or context. However, they worried greatly that if they spent time orienting the children to broader literacy activities—storytelling, story sequencing activities, reading for meaning or writing and vocabulary development in the primary language—that their students would not be gaining the skills that would be tested on the standardized English test. As a result, the school and the students could suffer sanctions. Thus, even in the classrooms that had been designated as bilingual, and where principals often contended that little had changed, teachers revealed that their teaching practices had indeed changed substantially and that their students were receiving much less literacy instruction in their primary language. Ethnographic accounts in the classroom best capture the focus of the instruction. The following account is an example of the intense focus on form over meaning, with an emphasis on teaching students how to respond to standard test-like questions in English:

Ms P. stood at the front of the class and had just read the first problem on the worksheet. She instructed students that they were supposed to circle each long vowel sound in each of the sentences and write this word in the long vowel column. Ms P. completed the first three sentences with the students. During the first three sentences, a few students were calling out without being officially recognized. When this happened on the 4th sentence, Ms P. said, “Since you seem to have no problem with this activity you can do it on your own.”

Ruben and Miguel rubbed their hands together excitedly when they were told that they would be doing the activity on their own:

Miguel: (Reading “Will Pat go to the store?” in a flat tone with no questioning intonation.) “Will Pat go to the store.” (Pauses for a moment.) “Will Pat go to the store.” (Still no raised intonation.) Will Pat . . . Pat go to the store? (An almost raised but unnatural intonation on store.) Miguel raises his head from the text. “That doesn’t make any sense.” “Don’t matter.” He picks up his pencil and writes the words *go* and *store* in the Long O column.

Thus, Miguel could write words with long O’s in a column, but he had no idea what the words meant.

In a focus group with teachers from one large urban district that was attempting to create more English-only classes as the result of Proposition 227, teachers expressed their views about the type of teaching chronicled above. One teacher critiqued the prevailing pedagogy in the following way:

I feel like the children are forced into silence. Really . . . they’re really not getting the opportunity to express themselves as they normally would were they in a bilingual classroom. And I, I feel sorry for them.

I really do. I think that it's very unfair. I don't think they're receiving an equal opportunity, equal education in the sense that they're really not learning to read. They're learning to decode. But, their decoding skills are coming along nicely, but the problem is that second language acquisition, it takes time. And you know the district expects us to move these children from ELD level 1 to ELD level 4 in a matter of one year, with ELD level 4 then you can begin to present instruction of all the subjects in English.

Another teacher in the focus group added:

One of my frustrations has been journals this year. My kids have been writing journals. I did a lot of journaling with them last year, my second graders. And this year they were all writing in Spanish in their journals and so I didn't know what to do. I really have just stopped journals because they really can't write what their thoughts are in English. And every once in a while I think about it and think they're not doing journals because I didn't want them to write in Spanish because I thought they weren't supposed to write in Spanish and they don't have enough knowledge to do it in English.

Thus, in the bilingual classrooms that were observed prior to the implementation of Proposition 227, a much more reductive notion of literacy was observed in its aftermath. Language and literacy were rarely used as tools for learning, but rather English language learning (oral fluency) was becoming the target of instruction. Heavy emphasis was placed on decoding skills (phonics) and vocabulary development rather than developing broader literacy skills such as reading for meaning, or writing. Teachers attributed this focus to their concerns about the English language testing to which students would be exposed.

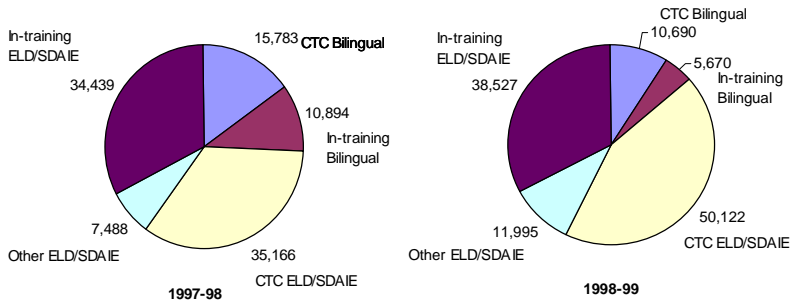
Gutiérrez and her colleagues, in a forthcoming publication that critiques the kinds of teaching practices observed in many schools in the aftermath of Proposition 227 notes,

Even when the use of the primary language is permitted, many classrooms instantiate the reforms in the most reductive literacy practices. In defiance to what we know about how children learn and become literate, reductive literacy practices organize learning in ways that make oral English language fluency the target of instruction, and thus equate oral English fluency with proficiency in academic English. Reductive literacy practices also define literacy learning as an individual accomplishment where skills are taught in isolation of meaning-making literate practices. Of consequence is that Latino children are socialized to reductive notions of literacy and its practices. (Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, forthcoming)

The Impact of Proposition 227 on the Distribution of Teachers for English Learners

In 1998, prior to the passage of Proposition 227, California had a shortfall of 11,000 certified bilingual teachers and 34,000 teachers certified to provide appropriate English language training (see Figure 2). This meant that only about one-third of all English learners had a fully certified teacher.

Figure 2. Number of teachers providing instructional services for English learners by certification, before and after Proposition 227



Note: Rumberger, R., & Gándara, P. (2000). The schooling of English learners. In E. Burr, G.

As a result of the growth in English immersion programs and the reduction of bilingual programs, the number of teachers seeking credentials to work with LEP students in English-only contexts has grown dramatically. For example, by 1999, the number of teachers with English language development (ELD) and specially designed academic instruction in English (SDAIE) training increased to 50,122 (see Figure 2). Another 11,995 teachers were “grandfathered” into the category of cross-cultural, language, and academic development (CLAD) teachers through provisions of Senate Bill 1969, which allowed experienced teachers to receive certification through staff development, training, or college work. Added to this number are 10,690 teachers with bilingual CLAD (BCLAD) and other bilingual credentials.

On paper, it appears that among those teachers in California who teach English learners, a significant number (52%) have received some kind of preparation in instructing these students. Unfortunately, this preparation is often cursory and only sufficient to make a teacher aware of what he or she does not know. Under SB 1969, CLAD certification can often be acquired with only 45 hours of relevant training. Moreover, students may not be assigned in their student teaching to the teachers who have been prepared to model best practices. This is due, in large part, to the unequal distribution of qualified teachers across schools and districts. Given the teacher shortage in the state, the best prepared teachers can choose to take positions in the suburbs and in districts with less challenging populations, forcing the less well-prepared teachers into the inner cities and the schools with high proportions of poor students and English learners.

A recent review of middle school and secondary programs for English learners points out the acute problem of under-preparation of CLAD-credentialed teachers to meet the needs of English learners, especially in math and science (Merino, 1999). Because these classes are “gatekeepers” for college preparatory coursework, students who do not do well in them are typically assigned to a general course of study that does not provide them with the option of entering a four-year college. This can have life-altering consequences for these students.

Although Proposition 227 had no statutory effect on the credentialing of bilingual teachers (BCLAD), the issue has been raised whether certified bilingual teachers are still needed or desirable in a state that has placed rigid restrictions on the provision of bilingual education. In a somewhat ironic twist, it may be that bilingual teachers are more necessary now than under the conditions that existed prior to the passage of the initiative. Structured English immersion, the instructional approach recommended by Proposition 227, is an approach that was designed to be used by teachers who had knowledge of their students’ primary language. While the children are usually not instructed in their primary language, past studies have nevertheless demonstrated that this approach is most effective when it incorporates a significant amount of primary language support to ease the students into the English-only curriculum (Walqui-van Lier, 1992). Moreover, bilingual teachers credentialed in California possess a body of knowledge about second language acquisition and the pedagogical tools that can enhance it that most non-bilingual teachers do not have (Milk, Mercado, & Sapiens, 1992). At a time when there is so little direction being provided to teachers to help them with English learners, this skill base of bilingual teachers may be especially important. There is also a growing awareness of the connection between parent involvement in schooling and children’s academic achievement, pointing to the critical importance of home-school communication (Moles, 1982; Lareau, 1987). Without a teacher who speaks the language of the home, direct communication is not likely to occur. Thus, while the instructional methods of teachers may change under the new law, the importance of understanding children’s educational needs in conjunction with their linguistic development and communicating with their families does not. However, the perception that bilingual teachers may no longer be needed in California is likely to affect negatively both the supply and demand of such teachers for the state’s English learners.

Conclusions

While everyone with an ax to grind in the “bilingual wars” in California is poring over the latest test score data in an attempt to bolster their cause, in fact, little can be concluded about the impact of Proposition 227 from these data. The two inescapable findings, however, are that relatively few LEP

students are ready to be transferred into mainstream classrooms after only one year as the law had provided, and there is a huge gulf between the performance of these students and their English-speaking peers. Moreover, the indications are that the gulf is growing rather than diminishing. The fact that so little can be said about the relative performance of LEP students is, in part, due to the limitations of the test data in specifying what kind of instructional program students are actually receiving. It is also a result of the fact that California's students have been exposed to a dizzying array of reforms in the last few years, and it is virtually impossible to isolate the effects of one from all others. On the other hand, observation and interviews in schools and classrooms that are grappling with the implementation of Proposition 227 yield some interesting and troublesome findings:

1. The initial shift of students from bilingual classrooms to English-only classrooms is rather modest. Most of the changes in program placement were into classrooms that used "mostly" English, but with some primary language support. We found that this was defined differently across classrooms, schools, and districts, so that it is impossible to know what most LEP students are being exposed to in the way of language support. Thus, Proposition 227, far from resulting in a monolithic English-only curriculum has actually resulted in enormous variability and inconsistency in students' instruction.
2. Proposition 227 has created a market for teachers certified to teach English learners in English. This has resulted in huge numbers of teachers becoming certified to teach English learners, many with very minimal preparation and with very rudimentary skills. As one CLAD-credentialed teacher in our earlier study noted, "The CLAD taught me enough to know what I don't know about teaching LEP students." As a market-driving device, Proposition 227 is tilting the demand away from bilingual teachers who can understand and monitor their students' learning toward English-only teachers.
3. Proposition 227, coupled with the new curricular standards and a high stakes statewide testing program does appear to be changing the nature of pedagogy in the classroom for all children, but with particularly onerous consequences for English learners. As Gutiérrez et al. (forthcoming) note, literacy instruction has become, in many cases, reductive, with a laser-beam emphasis on teaching students to "get the answer" whether or not they understand it. This bottom-line orientation toward teaching is especially worrisome for English learners, as it provides no opportunity for students to become comfortable with the new language before they are required to produce "correct answers" in it. It should not be surprising, then, that with each subsequent grade level, test score gains decline precipitously. As the easier test items in second grade (where the highest score gains are reported) give way to more complex and demanding material in the upper grades, test score gains are only barely noticeable.

In sum, the numerous reform efforts underway in California, and the limitations of existing data, make it impossible to draw conclusions about the independent effects of the passage of Proposition 227 on the academic achievement of English learners. Contrary to the political statements and shoot-from-the-hip analyses being touted in the press, the achievement scores of California's English learners yield little evidence of long term benefits for these students. Observational data collected in the state's classrooms, on the other hand, show a sometimes distressing picture of teachers responding to a high stakes test in ways that reward rote learning and undermine the kind of language-rich teaching that is so critical to the long term success of limited English learners.

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Endnotes

¹ California State Board of Education, Policy 98-04. *Educational Programs and Services for English Learners*. Adopted October 10, 1998.

² The designation of ELD, “English language development” is used by the state Department of Education to include all programs whose focus is on the use of English for the purposes of instruction and incorporates the “structured English immersion” named in the Proposition 227 initiative as well as similar programs that go by other names, such as sheltered English and SDAIE (Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English).