A Fabric of Half-Truths
A Response to Keith Baker
On Structured English Immersion

BY NICHOLAS MEIER

Keith Baker's article on Structured English Immersion is filled with so many inaccuracies and misleading statements that it is hard to know where to begin, Mr. Meier charges.

A TEACHER who has spent a career working with second-language students, I feel I must respond to Keith Baker's November 1998 article, "Structured English Immersion: Breakthrough in Teaching Limited-English-Proficient Students." I currently work as a resource teacher implementing both a successful Structured English Immersion (SEI) program and a Two-Way Spanish/English bilingual program in the Campbell (California) Union School District, so I am not in any way opposed to SEI. What I do object to is blatant misuse of data. Keith Baker's article on SEI is filled with so many inaccuracies and misleading statements that it is hard to know where to begin, so I will just point out a few.

His use of the Ramirez study in Table 1 turns this study on its head. Anybody who reads the actual study will see that, while the data shown by Baker are accurate, what he has left out is that the gains of the "immersion" and "early-exit" students in the early grades are not sustained over time. The scores of students in these groups level off, while those in the "late-exit" group continue to progress through sixth grade (where the study ends). Why does he leave out that table? The Ramirez study comes to exactly the opposite conclusion from the one Baker abuses it to make. The more recent study by Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier shows how this effect is even more accentuated in high school, where the scores of students in ELD (English Language Development) programs tend to drop, the scores of students in early-exit bilingual programs tend to level off, and the scores of students in late-exit bilingual programs catch up to, and possibly surpass, those of native speakers.

In another instance Baker compares the results of an immersion program with those of an ill-defined program. A well-defined program of any type will almost invariably outperform any ill-defined one. But that should not be the question. The question is which well-designed program is likely to be more successful. So that example is really no use to us at all. His argument that too little English is the problem with many programs is unsubstantiated by any known data. It is the late-exit programs that use more native language that were most successful in the major long-term studies on bilingual education. There is absolutely no evidence to support the notion that it is lack of English that causes the language-minority students to drop out.

In his use of the New York study, Baker even undermines himself. If one does not take into account issues of income, ethnicity, class, and other such factors, then no valid conclusions can be drawn — though he decides he can ignore this fact. One cannot know if it is really these other factors and not the program that created the difference. This is often the case in education, where issues such as class, race, and parental educational level can be very powerful indicators of one's likelihood of success in our school system.

Baker's citation of the Canadian French Immersion model as an example of structured immersion is completely misleading. In the Canadian model it is dominant-language students who are learning the minority language. These students are in no danger of losing their primary language. This model actually shares more in common with two-way immersion programs than with structured immersion programs. In two-way immersion programs, English-speaking students learn a second language alongside students who are learning English. The students in the Canadian French Immersion program are expected to end up being bilingual and biliterate, like those in a two-way immersion program, whereas in structured immersion programs the students usually lose their native language — or retain it only at a basic oral, nonacademic, nonliterate level.

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When Baker claims that learning a sec-
ond language is no big deal, he is again
talking about a partial truth. Immigrant chil-
dren usually gain a basic conversational
fluency within a year or two in any pro-
geram. But mastering a language at the lev-
el of academic discourse necessary to do
well in school — i.e., reading textbooks,
writing essays, following and developing
abstract arguments — is altogether differ-
ent. This mastery generally takes at least
five years and often several more. Because
of this, any study that looks at short-term
results (and I see even three years as short,
since that is not enough time to achieve the
needed native-like fluency) should be
regarded with skepticism. It is very pos-
sible that any gains shown by a particular
approach in its first few years may not be
sustained over time. It is the long range
that matters.

The research analysis that Baker cites
to support his contention that SEI works
better than bilingual education is his own.
But another analysis of the same data, done
by Ann Willig, indicates that Baker engaged
in the same type of mis-
use of data in that analysis as he does in
this article. Willig shows how a more rigor-
ous analysis of that same data actually
support bilingual education as being more beneficial.

Another, more recent meta-analysis of
the well-designed studies on bilingual ed-
ucation up to 1997 was recently done by
Jay Greene. Again it clearly shows that,
even in the short term, bilingual programs
tend to show better results than immersion
programs. ("Well-designed" was defined, in
part, as having a matched control group
and being at least one year in duration.)
Baker’s article is full of half-truths and
abuses of data used to support his particu-
lar bias toward SEI. In many cases SEI
programs may be effective or may be the
best alternative when a bilingual program
is not feasible. But that is a far cry from
saying that the research supports SEI as
the most effective approach. It is this type
of misuse of data that gives rise to the cy-
ncical attitude of the public that "research
can be used to prove anything" and is ther-
fore untrustworthy.

1. Wayne P. Thomas and Virginia Collier, "Research
Summary of Study in Progress: Language Minori-
y Student Achievement and Program Effectiveness,
Results as of September 1993," unpublished paper.

2. Ibid., and 1. David Rattner et al., Final Report:
Longitudinal Study of Structured Immersion Strat-
egy: Early-Exit and Late-Exit Transitional Biling-
ual Education Programs for Language Minority
Children Grant Number: CA: Agnati International,
Report to the U.S. Department of Education, Con-

Studies on the Effectiveness of Bilingual Educa-
tion," Review of Educational Research, vol. 55,

4. Jay Greene, A Meta-analysis of the Effectiveness
of Bilingual Education (Claremont, Calif.: Torus
Rivera Policy Institute, 1999).

What the Research Really Says
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of Spanish per day outperformed children in bilingual education on tests for 11 years,
with no difference in year 12. The program was not limited to 30 minutes of Spanish
per day, nor did they research come out the way Baker says it did. The program, which
others have called "bilingual immersion," is described by the El Paso Independent
School District as follows:

NCLD (native language cognitive development) is taught for 60% to 90 min-
utes per day. The objective of this com-
ponent is to develop concepts, literacy, and critical thinking skills in Spanish.
It is during this period that instruction
and student-teacher interaction are en-
tirely in Spanish. The more demanding
content area concepts are also introduced
during NCLD, particularly in first grade.

The El Paso program was evaluated in reports in which it was compared to a biling-
ual plan that emphasized traditional language arts instruction and delayed in-
ception of English reading. Greene, John
Woodward, and Susan Schneider reviewed
the results of testing done during grades
through 7, when most school instruction
was in English for both groups. They
reported that the former "bilingual immor-
tion" students did better in all aspects of
academic performance in grade 4, but there were no differences between the
students in grade 7. More bilingual immersion stu-
dents, however, had been placed in the main-
stream by grade 6, and bilingual immor-
tion teachers were more confident about
students' eventual success. Gersten, Scott
Baker, and Thomas Keating continued the
evaluation into the high school years and
reported no significant differences between
graduates of the two approaches, except
for a small advantage for the comparison
group on a measure of writing. Gersten's
studies were actually a comparison of two
versions of bilingual education that differed
in several ways, including the use of comp-
prehensible-input-based methodology ver-
sus a skill-building methodology and the
grade at which literacy is introduced in
English.

Finally, Baker claims that there is lit-
tle research supporting the practice of teach-
ing subjects in the primary language while
the children are acquiring English. He may
disagree with the results of this research, but
plenty of it exists.

Research also exists that shows that a second language can be taught through
English. However, there are no data show-
ing that all-English structured immersion
programs are superior to well-constructed
programs that include literacy develop-
ment and subject-matter teaching in the
child's first language. Such programs al-
so include the teaching of English through
content.

1. Stephen Krashen, Bilingual Education: A Focus
on Current Research (Washington, D.C.: National
Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1991) and
Identity, Under Attack: The Case Against Bilingual
Education (Purvis City, Calif.: Language Education

2. Russell Gersten, "Structured Immersion for Lan-
geuage Minority Students: Results of a Longitudinal
Evaluation," Educational Evaluation and Policy

3. Wolody Breckler and Russell Gersten, "A Follow
Up of Follow Through: The Later Effects of the Dist-
raction Instruction Model on Children at Fifth and Sixth
Grades," American Educational Research Journal,

4. Texas Education Agency, Program Evaluation
Report: Bilingual/SEI Education (Austin: Publica-
tions Distribution Office, Texas Education Agency,

5. Ibid., p. 25.

6. Ibid., p. 56.

7. El Paso Independent School District, Bilingual
Education Evaluation: The Fourth Year in a Longi-

8. Russell Gersten, John Woodward, and Susan
Schneider, Bilingual Immersion: A Longitudinal
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9. Russell Gersten, Scott Baker, and Thomas Keat-
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ers: A Longitudinal Follow-Up Study," READ Per-

10. See, for example, Jay Greene, A Meta-analysis of
the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education (Clare-
mont, Calif.: Torus Rivera Policy Institute, 1998); and
Ann C. Willig, "A Meta-analysis of Selected
Studies on the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education," Review

11. Stephen Krashen, "Staying Subject Matter Teach-


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