

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.

AS 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" stu-

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dents in the early grades are not sustained over time. The scores of students in these groups level out, 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.¹

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.² 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 second language is no big deal, he is again telling only a partial truth. Immigrant children usually gain a basic conversational fluency within a year or two in any program. But mastering a language at the level of academic discourse necessary to do well in school — i.e. reading textbooks, writing essays, following and developing abstract arguments — is altogether different. 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 possible 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 that same data, done by Ann Willig, demonstrates that Baker engaged in the same type of misuse of data in that analysis as he does in this article.³ Willig shows how a more rigorous analysis of that same data actually supports bilingual education as being more effective.

Another, more recent meta-analysis of the well-designed studies on bilingual education 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.⁴ ("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 particular 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 cynical attitude of the public that "research can be used to prove anything" and is therefore unreliable.

1. Wayne P. Thomas and Virginia Collier, "Research Summary of Study in Progress: Language Minority Student Achievement and Program Effectiveness, Results as of September 1995," unpublished paper.

2. Ibid.; and J. David Ramirez et al., *Final Report: Longitudinal Study of Structured Immersion Strategy. Early-Exit, and Late-Exit Transitional Bilingual Education Programs for Language-Minority Children* (San Mateo, Calif.: Aguirre International, Report to the U.S. Department of Education, Contract No. 300-83-0250, 1991).

3. Ann C. Willig, "A Meta-analysis of Selected Studies on the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education," *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 55, 1985, pp. 269-317.

4. Jay Greene, *A Meta-analysis of the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education* (Claremont, Calif.: Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 1998). ■

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 the 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:

NLCD [native language cognitive development] is taught for 60 to 90 minutes per day. The objective of this component is to develop concepts, literacy, and critical thinking skills in Spanish. It is during this period that instruction and student-teacher interaction are entirely in Spanish. The more demanding content area concepts are also introduced during NLCD, particularly in first grade.⁷

The El Paso program was evaluated in reports in which it was compared to a bilingual plan that emphasized traditional language arts instruction and delayed introduction of English reading. Gersten, John Woodward, and Susan Schneider reviewed the results of testing done during grades 4 through 7, when most school instruction was in English for both groups.⁸ They reported that the former "bilingual immersion" students did better in all aspects of academic performance in grade 4, but there were no differences between the groups in grade 7. More bilingual immersion students, however, had been placed in the mainstream by grade 6, and bilingual immersion 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.⁹ Gersten's

studies were actually a comparison of two versions of bilingual education that differed in several ways, including the use of comprehensible-input-based methodology versus a skill-building methodology and the grade at which literacy is introduced in English.

Finally, Baker claims that there is little research supporting the practice of teaching 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.¹⁰

Research also exists that shows that a second language can be taught through content.¹¹ However, there are no data showing that all-English structured immersion programs are superior to well-constructed programs that include literacy development and subject-matter teaching in the child's first language. Such programs also include the teaching of English through content.¹²

1. Stephen Krashen, *Bilingual Education: A Focus on Current Research* (Washington, D.C.: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1991); and idem, *Under Attack: The Case Against Bilingual Education* (Culver City, Calif.: Language Education Associates, 1996).

2. Russell Gersten, "Structured Immersion for Language Minority Students: Results of a Longitudinal Evaluation," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, vol. 7, 1985, pp. 187-96.

3. Wesley Becker and Russell Gersten, "A Follow Up of Follow Through: The Later Effects of the Direct Instruction Model on Children in Fifth and Sixth Grades," *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 19, 1982, pp. 75-92.

4. Texas Education Agency, *Program Evaluation Report: Bilingual/ESL Education* (Austin: Publications Distribution Office, Texas Education Agency, TEA Publication No. RE9-726-03, September 1988).

5. Ibid., p. 25.

6. Ibid., p. 56.

7. El Paso Independent School District, *Bilingual Education Evaluation: The Fourth Year in a Longitudinal Study, 1987-1988 School Year* (El Paso: Office for Research and Evaluation, 1989), p. 54.

8. Russell Gersten, John Woodward, and Susan Schneider, *Bilingual Immersion: A Longitudinal Evaluation of the El Paso Program* (Washington, D.C.: The READ Institute, 1992).

9. Russell Gersten, Scott Baker, and Thomas Keating, "El Paso Programs for English Language Learners: A Longitudinal Follow-Up Study," *READ Perspectives*, vol. 5, 1998, pp. 4-28.

10. See, for example, Jay Greene, *A Meta-analysis of the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education* (Claremont, Calif.: Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 1998); and Ann C. Willig, "A Meta-analysis of Selected Studies on the Effectiveness of Bilingual Education," *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 55, 1985, pp. 269-317.

11. Stephen Krashen, "Sheltered Subject Matter Teaching," *Cross Currents*, vol. 18, 1991, pp. 183-88.

12. Krashen, *Under Attack*. ■