

“Science” in Rhetoric and Reality

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires states and school districts to rely on “scientifically based research,” both in designing instructional programs and in training teachers to serve English language learners (ELLs).

Great idea, you might say. Clearly, bilingual education has strong scientific support. It’s about time we put that knowledge into action consistently, on a national scale. Half-baked English-only programs may be cheaper or easier or politically safer to provide. But educational decisions that affect children’s futures should be based on what works, as determined by rigorous research. At long last, with NCLB, the federal government seems to have endorsed this principle. Now that programs must be “scientifically based,” can we expect a resurgence of bilingual approaches in the classroom?

Unfortunately, this promise—like other high-minded provisions of the law—has proved to be more rhetoric than reality. Three years ago the Bush Administration commissioned a \$1.8 million study to determine the best approaches for teaching English literacy to ELLs. A step in the right direction. But then its knees went all wobbly when the results came back favoring bilingual education. Apparently fearful of the political reaction, it refused to publish the results.

The U.S. Department of Education remains officially agnostic about the best program models. Schools are offered no real guidance about what works for ELLs. They are simply threatened with sanctions if students fail to meet achievement targets—as measured, for the most part, by English-language assessments.

The result is that, under NCLB, English learners are less likely to receive instruction in their native language. Instead, they are subjected to heavy doses of test-prep and phonics drills in English. Bilingual programs are being phased out, regardless of their proven benefits, in many districts. In others, especially those with new immigrant populations, they’ve never even been tried.

This trend is especially ironic, considering the solid evidence favoring bilingual education in a growing number of scientific studies. In this issue of *Language Learner*, we take a close look at that research.

Stephen Krashen and Grace McField analyze some of the most important reviews of the scientific literature, including two “meta-analyses” that have appeared in the last year. The findings are so similar—and so consistent—that they add up to a powerful case for bilingual education.

Jeff McQuillan demolishes the myth, all too widespread even within our field, about the “low quality” of research on ELL programs. He shows that studies of bilingual education are as rigorous—if not more so—as those in other areas of education and psychology.



James Crawford
NABE Executive Director

How should we respond to the dismissal of research findings on the effectiveness of bilingual programs? Using Texas as an example, Josefina Tinajero offers some sage insights about the political opportunities and pitfalls before us.

Language Learner welcomes your insights as well. Please write and let us know what you think of our new magazine. Better yet, submit an article for publication. Editor Carmella Baccari welcomes emails at c_baccari@nabe.org ■■■