

The Importance of Primary Language Support and Primary Language Instruction

*“School districts are required to continue to provide additional and appropriate educational services to English learners until they have demonstrated English-language skills comparable to that of the district’s average native English-language speakers and have **recouped any academic deficits** which may have been incurred in other areas of the core curriculum (CCR, Title 5, section 11302). Services must continue until ELs meet objective reclassification criteria (EC 313). This means that EL students must be provided with **ELD and SDAIE, as needed, and/or primary language instruction** until they are redesignated as fluent English proficient (FEP).” (California Department of Education)*

Questions

As I read this requirement from the California Department of Education for English Learners, the following questions come to mind because so many schools are deciding that primary language instruction is not needed for their English Learners. Programs that provide ELD and SDAIE are considered as the priority for English Learners instruction and professional development training is provided to improve ELD and SDAIE services. The legal requirement loophole is “as needed, and/or.”

- What is primary language support?
- What is primary language instruction?
- What happens to English Learners who do not receive primary language support in the schools?
- What happens to students who are forced to function entirely in a language they do not understand?
- Is primary language instruction a double standard that only applies to English Learners?
- Why do schools deny English Learners primary language instruction and expect them to function entirely in their second language?
- Do schools deny native English speakers primary language instruction and require them to receive all academic instruction in their second language?
- Do native English speakers in dual immersion programs receive primary language support?
- How do schools determine when primary language support is no longer needed for English Learners?
- How many redesignated FEP students are offered or receive primary language support?

My Spanish [my primary language]

I believe that our goal in the public schools should be to help as many students as possible to become bilingual to the highest levels possible. Hopefully, this story about my Spanish language loss and subsequent recovery might help you understand my position.

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When I first entered school in Leadville, Colorado the school policy was that only English was allowed to be spoken at school. I was the bilingual cousin who translated for my non-English speaking cousins. I spent a lot of time sitting in the hall. By the time I reached fifth grade, I no longer spoke nor understood Spanish. I had become monolingual English. I couldn't communicate with my non-English speaking relatives.

In 7th grade my mother, two brothers and I moved to live on my grandfather's property in Llano, New Mexico. Most of my cousins were bilingual and many of the older generation only spoke New Mexico Spanish. I realized that I had not only lost my Spanish but also my culture. I started learning how to read using the Spanish scriptures. I was taught how to eat my food with flour tortillas and no silverware. Funerals, weddings, and baptisms were all three day events.

When I went to school in Taos High, New Mexico, I began taking Spanish classes. My Spanish teacher explained that our New Mexico Spanish was different from standard Spanish. He emphasized that we should be proud of our own version of Spanish and that we should also learn to use standard Spanish. I continued reclaiming my New Mexico Spanish.

When I went to school at Mt. Hermon, Massachusetts, I was failing my Spanish class even though I was the only native speaker of Spanish enrolled in the class. My teacher discovered that I didn't know the grammatical labels required to be able to complete the translation exams. She gave me the whole exam orally without specifying grammatical structures and I passed with flying colors.

I went to Valladolid, Spain as an International Exchange Student and again discovered how different my New Mexico Spanish was from the Castilian Spanish of central Spain. My pride in my own language and culture was strengthened.

When I enrolled in Spanish classes at New Mexico Highlands University, our Spanish teacher was writing a Spanish textbook to be used at the university level. He included many charts of "incorrect Spanish" and "correct Spanish". The incorrect Spanish was our New Mexico Spanish.

I have worked as a bilingual teacher in California for more than 30 years and have found that language loss in the United States is a "byproduct" of our public school system that still does not recognize the importance of primary language instruction and support. Unfortunately, primary language loss occurs for both English Learners and Fluent English Proficient students.

Probable consequences

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Here are a few examples of the probable consequences of second language instruction for English Learners without primary language support [ELD + SDAIE only]. We know that children learn differently and children react in different ways when their primary language is threatened.

- ✓ Loss of the primary language
- ✓ Rejection of home language and culture
- ✓ Students become monolingual English speakers
- ✓ Limited or no literacy skills in either the home language or the second language
- ✓ Referrals to special education
- ✓ Special Education services without primary language instruction or support
- ✓ Potential high school dropouts
- ✓ Below basic scores on many state and federal examinations
- ✓ Increased probability of gang involvement
- ✓ Loss of family ties [especially with family members who do not speak English]
- ✓ Feelings of rejection from the “American society”
- ✓ Loss of self-esteem and self-identity
- ✓ Cultural clashes between school and home

Resources

I have listed a few websites for you to learn more about language loss and the related consequences.

Center For Applied Linguistics

“Involuntary Language Loss Among Immigrants: Asian-American Linguistic Autobiographies

<http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/involuntary.html>

MIT Indigenous Language Initiative: Language Loss

<http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/mitili/language%20loss.html>

Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty

“Silent Extinction: Language Loss Reaches Crisis Levels”

http://www.rferl.org/content/Silent_Extinction_Language_Loss_Reaches_Crisis_Levels/1963070.html

“Seven Hypothesis on Language Loss: Causes and Cures”

James Crawford

<http://faculty.ed.umuc.edu/~jmatthew/articles/seven.html>

The New York Times: The Opinion Pages

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“Primero Hay Que Aprender Español. Ranhou Zai Xue Zhongwen.”

Nicholas D. Kristof

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/30/opinion/30kristof.html?_r=1

“What is language loss?”

Erin Haynes, University of California, Berkeley

<http://www.cal.org/heritage/pdfs/briefs/what-is-language-loss.pdf>