

# **Immersion Not Submersion**

*Converting English Learner Programs from  
Bilingual Education to Structured English Immersion  
in California and Elsewhere*

By Kelly Torrance, Adjunct Scholar

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### **Executive Summary**

Proposition 227 places strict limits on the use of bilingual education in California's public school classrooms. But seven years after voters overwhelmingly passed the ballot initiative, many of the state's English learners in holdout school districts are still taught in their native language for most of the school day.

With increasing frequency, school districts that had clung to bilingual programs in spite of Prop. 227 are now recognizing the benefits of structured English immersion. Test results clearly indicate that immersion is working. In 2001, only a quarter of English learners scored in the top two proficiency categories on the California English Language Development Test. By 2004, almost half did.

Yet there is often a scarcity of useful resources for educators and administrators to utilize to move away from the bilingual programs they've used for decades or to design an effective structured English immersion program.

This paper collects some of the lessons learned by two very different California school districts – both of which have implemented successful immersion programs. Both districts have seen their immigrant students' test scores soar. This paper describes their experiences, and discusses "lessons learned" in a format other education decisionmakers may choose to consider.

Details follow.

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### **Introduction**

Jim Gibson says bilingual education is “dead.” And many of his colleagues agree with him.

Why is this noteworthy?

Because Gibson is a trustee of the Vista Unified School District in San Diego County. Gibson’s district has been one of the most resistant to Proposition 227, the 1998 ballot initiative that mandated bilingual’s demise. While other nearby districts have followed the law and implemented structured English immersion programs, Vista has stubbornly stuck to its bilingual program.

Prop. 227 allows parents to seek waivers allowing them to keep their children in bilingual programs – if numbers warrant – and Vista officials have consistently encouraged parents to apply. About half of the district’s English learners remained in bilingual programs during the last school year, seven years after Prop. 227 overwhelmingly passed.

Meanwhile, Vista’s English learners have consistently performed poorly on statewide tests, especially compared with nearby districts that have embraced immersion. When new test results were released in September, Vista’s lagging performance could no longer be ignored – 18 Vista schools aren’t meeting state proficiency standards under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

This stark reality served as a wake-up call to Vista board members, who are finally in agreement that bilingual education simply isn’t working. They’ve now declared they want to see the district move away from bilingual and toward immersion.

But how do they do it?

The debate over Prop. 227 may finally be over in Vista. But for many districts like it, the question of *how* to implement its mandate has become the new million-dollar question. Vista is not alone in facing this challenge. Throughout California, school districts are struggling to free their English learners from the bilingual quagmire.

Converting from bilingual to immersion is no easy task. For many school districts, bilingual programs have been the status quo for years, even decades. This resistance has been bolstered by strong interest groups like the California Association for Education, the National Association for Bilingual Education, and the National Education Association. Many educators aren’t even familiar with modern immersion methods.

Officials at many school districts across California would like to educate their growing English learner populations through structured immersion programs. But all too often, they simply don't know where to start.

This paper examines what flourishing school districts are doing – those that have implemented structured immersion programs and seen their English learner test scores soar. The purpose is to create a roadmap for educators in districts like Vista – to help them create their own successful immersion programs.

The focus is two California school districts that implemented immersion before and immediately after Prop. 227 passed. Sharing their lessons will help other teachers, principals, and trustees fulfill the mission they all have – providing English learners with the language skills they need to become successful members of their communities.

### **The Two Districts**

On the surface, the Orange Unified School District and the Atwater Elementary School District are two very different districts. But in implementing new programs for English learners, they have found common ground.

Orange Unified's authority includes over 100 square miles in Orange County in Southern California. The cities of Orange, Villa Park, and parts of Santa Ana, Anaheim, and Garden Grove fall under its jurisdiction. It educates more than 30,000 students in kindergarten through grade 12, including 6,828 who are limited English proficient.

The district helped ignite the debate over bilingual education in California. In 1996, before Prop. 227 was even on the ballot, Orange Unified petitioned the California Board of Education, asking it to waive the district's obligation to continue providing Spanish-language instruction to English learners and hire more bilingual teachers. The state board at first wouldn't budge. The district accumulated hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal bills before the board finally relented. In 1997, Orange Unified began offering a structured English immersion program, almost nine months before Prop. 227 passed.

Unlike Orange Unified, Atwater Elementary School District doesn't have the world's most famous theme park (Disneyland) in its district limits. The district encompasses about 50 square miles in Merced County in Central California – about 30 miles south of Modesto and 80 miles east of San Francisco. Its eight schools teach about 4,700 children from kindergarten to grade eight. Of those, 1,700 are limited English proficient.

Whereas Orange Unified was a leader in the push toward immersion, Atwater was firmly entrenched in bilingual education. For years, it was monitored by the federal Office for Civil Rights (OCR), and was required to hire additional bilingual teachers and provide increased Spanish language instruction. When Prop. 227 passed in 1998, the district quickly eliminated its bilingual program and implemented a structured English immersion program.

## **A To-Do List**

Key lessons learned by districts with successful structured immersion programs:

- Build teacher confidence by providing ongoing training.
- Provide a structured program in which students move up the ladder of fluency. Atwater, like many districts, uses a tri-level approach: Accelerated Classes for English for beginners, Bridge for intermediates, and Mainstream for advanced speakers.
- Make English the language of instruction in the classroom, and use Spanish only when necessary to explain assignments.
- Teaching reading through phonics works better than the whole-language approach.
- Stop segregation: Mix English learners with fluent speakers wherever possible.
- Continue to provide support after students enter the mainstream.
- Explain the program to trustees, teachers, principals, and parents: Everyone needs to be on board.
- Search out specially-designed curricula and textbooks for English learners (see “Useful Resources” on page 10) and, where possible, contact educators and administrators from successful immersion districts for advice.

### **Test Scores Soared Under Immersion**

The two districts may be quite different, but they have one important thing in common – both saw test scores of English learners rise impressively once they scrapped bilingual programs and implemented structured English immersion.

The state as a whole made impressive gains after Prop. 227 passed. In 2001, only a quarter of English learners scored in the top two proficiency categories on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). By 2004, almost half did.

English learners in Orange Unified, which enacted immersion before the rest of the state, are performing even better. In 2001, 30 percent of Orange Unified English learners scored in the top two levels of the CELDT. By 2004, they were five points above the state average, at 52 percent.

While Atwater’s scores are lower, its gains are even more stunning. In 2001, after years of OCR monitoring, only 12 percent of English learners scored in CELDT’s top two proficiency

levels. By 2004, after the district had embraced immersion for years, 43 percent did. That's a gain of 31 percentage points.

### **Immersion Not Submersion**

Perhaps the most important lesson to take from these two successful school districts is that immersion isn't submersion. Prop. 227 – and other, similar mandates in other states – doesn't require schools to throw students willy-nilly into mainstream classes. Immersion doesn't mean sink or swim, as opponents argue. All English immersion means is that English – not the student's native language – is the primary language of instruction in classrooms and progress toward English fluency is the main goal.

Model school districts have put much thought and planning into their structured programs. There's a big difference, after all, between simply teaching in English and actually teaching English.

When Orange Unified began its program in 1997, it was a trailblazer, but didn't have the luxury of learning from the districts around it. "At first, [our English learners] were placed in anyone's classroom," recalls Bobbie Ochoa, Orange Unified's Coordinator of English Language Development. "They weren't clustered in little groups with teachers who knew what to do with them."

Ochoa herself started out with the district as a fourth grade bilingual teacher. In fact, she still believes that with proper instruction, bilingual education is superior to immersion. And she is quick to point out that Orange Unified isn't doing as well as she would like in educating immigrant students.

But as an immersion skeptic herself, Ochoa is perhaps the ideal person to offer guidance to other educators who are wary of making the switch. For Ochoa has also seen the benefits of switching to immersion.

The biggest benefit she noted is that when English is the language of the classroom, it becomes easier to find qualified teachers – because the teacher no longer has to be fluent in the student's primary language.

Orange Unified had had a shortage of qualified bilingual teachers. "You have to have someone who's competent in the language and the subject matter," she says. It was hard to find teachers good at both. "If you look at graduation rates from college, not many bilingual college graduates are going into teaching. They're going into something more lucrative."

But these new English learner teachers needed to be trained, she noted. Ochoa persuasively argues that with California's rising immigrant population and the increasing number of districts moving to immersion, state schools of education should make such training a prerequisite of graduation.

Every teacher in Orange Unified now must hold authorization to teach English learners. “That is a really big key to making it work.”

### **Building Teacher Confidence Is Key**

Along with interest groups like the California Association for Education, teachers have been some of the biggest defenders of bilingual education programs. Orange Unified’s teachers decided they didn’t want to abandon bilingual education when the district did. “There was a mass exodus of teachers for districts that were still practicing bilingual,” Ochoa remembers.

Atwater found that the key to a successful immersion program was involving teachers as much as possible in the transition.

“Bilingual teachers were really reluctant to give up bilingual classes and bilingual instruction,” says Lou Obermeyer, superintendent of the Atwater Elementary School District. “As with anything new, they had to leave things behind, like the way they were teaching.”

While changing a long-held paradigm is always difficult, teachers understood the necessity. “No Child Left Behind has brought such a level of accountability,” notes Obermeyer. Student test data clearly showed that bilingual wasn’t working. “Once we began sharing data with teachers by subgroup, they began saying, ‘what do we need to do – what can we do?’”

Ochoa of Orange Unified agrees that it’s critical to assess regularly and keep good data on English learners, something Orange Unified wasn’t doing very well during its bilingual era and before NCLB. “We’re using data for every decision that we make instructionally,” she says.

It took some work, but now teachers in the Atwater district see the structured immersion program as just “the way we do things here.”

“You have to put in time and training to be able to effectively implement the program,” Obermeyer says. “We had lots of conversations and training and refocusing.”

### **What Does a Successful Immersion Program Look Like?**

Like many other school districts that offer immersion programs, Atwater Elementary has found that a tri-level system, with students working their way up the ladder, works best.

Students with very little English enter Atwater’s Accelerated Classes for English, or A.C.E. This is an intensive program that aims to give students basic English literacy in a year. Prop. 227 itself says that immersion programs should not be “normally intended to exceed one year.” Not all students meet that goal – some remain in the program for two years – but many of the younger ones do. Superintendent Obermeyer notes that students in kindergarten and grade one can learn a new language more easily than older students.

The A.C.E. program focuses on English oral development. And it eschews whole-language learning that used to be popular with educators, despite its mixed results. “There’s a lot on phonics and learning letter sounds,” Obermeyer says.

Students graduate from A.C.E. into the Bridge program, which was developed for students at the intermediate, early advanced, and advanced levels of English fluency. Here, students continue their English learning while the academic content becomes deeper. “We can’t leave them behind in content,” notes Obermeyer. In other words, at this stage there’s a healthy mix of English-language instruction with mainstream academic instruction.

Finally, students move into mainstream classrooms with native English speakers. Instruction is completely in English, and academic content is completely grade appropriate.

The goal of all three programs is “to teach students the English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills necessary for success in the District’s education programs.” That doesn’t mean that after a year of A.C.E., students will be as fluent as their native English speaker counterparts.

It’s an important distinction. Many people resistant to immersion hear about one-year programs and declare that students can’t possibly become fluent in English in a year. Even after exiting the program, students are still learning English. It’s true that their English certainly won’t be perfect. But studies have clearly shown that students can learn enough in a year to understand English-only classrooms. Programs like A.C.E. give students the tools they need to become successful English speakers.

### **What Does “Overwhelmingly” in English Mean?**

Proposition 227 states that California immersion programs must be taught “overwhelmingly” in English. But what does that mean? A completely English-only classroom? More than 50 percent?

Successful schools have found students learn English faster when the native language is strictly limited. They aim to get students using English from the get go.

“We don’t have a [required] ratio,” says Obermeyer. But teachers should only use the native language when it’s needed for students to understand an assignment. “The Spanish is an aid.” A.C.E. program teachers are usually bilingual, with a knowledge of Spanish. But Bridge and Mainstream teachers don’t need to know a second language, and the district tries to have classroom aides who do wherever possible.

Orange Unified’s philosophy is the same. English dominates. But Spanish is allowed when students converse among themselves, and when teachers need to ensure that something is understood. “Spanish is used in group work and to explain things on the part of the teacher,” says Ochoa. Gone are the days when students might only hear English for half an hour each day.



## **Assimilation or Segregation?**

In bilingual education programs, immigrant students were usually segregated from the rest of their classmates. Without the benefit of being around English-speaking classmates, they often found it much more difficult to pick up their new language.

Structured immersion programs have led to much more assimilation. Many of them still feature classrooms of only immigrant students. But there are a lot fewer of these segregated classrooms than before.

Obermeyer says that most of Atwater's A.C.E. students are taught separately, with one big exception – kindergarteners. At that level, immigrant and native-English speakers alike are taught in the same classroom, she says. "They're really all learning the same thing: letters, sounds, phonemes. It's really an immersion program for kindergarten."

Atwater's Bridge program sometimes features fluent and non-fluent students in the same classroom, due to the small class sizes. But English learners are always given extra help.

## **Orange Unified: The Best of Both Worlds**

Orange Unified separates out English learners in middle and high school, when they need to learn the language more quickly and regular classrooms might be too advanced for them. But in elementary schools, immigrant students are mostly mixed into regular classrooms, then taken out for their English Language Development instruction.

Educators there describe their program as offering the best of both worlds for immigrant students. "They get the modeling of the English speakers," notes Ochoa. "But there still has to be a time during the day to receive that focused, targeted instruction."

English Language Development (ELD) is a literacy curriculum specially designed for English learners. From kindergarten to grade two, Orange Unified students receive 30 minutes of ELD daily. Grades three to six receive 45 to 60 minutes daily. That's all in addition to the English language arts instruction received by all students, including native-English speakers. In middle and high school, the amount of English-language instruction depends on the level of student ability – it's usually two or three periods a day.

Students generally spend two to three years receiving special instruction before they're completely "immersed" in mainstream classes. If they still need help after that, the district provides support classes – for example, an academic writing class that supports the regular language arts curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

Change is never easy. After decades of hearing that bilingual education is best for immigrant students, it's only natural that many educators would be reluctant to revamp their programs. But after decades of huge achievement gaps between English learners and native-English speakers, many teachers, principals, and trustees see the need to update their strategy.

Immigrant parents have always been one of the biggest supporters of immersion education. Many of them came to America at great risk to offer their children a better life. And they know that the key to success in this country is the ability to speak English fluently – higher education and professional career opportunities require it. Both Atwater and Orange Unified have found parents to be supportive. “We’re not hearing any complaints,” Obermeyer says. “I think parents sought a waiver for two children three years ago.”

Superintendent Obermeyer, who oversees a district that has seen its California English Language Development Test scores rise by 31 percentage points, offers some advice to districts that want to offer their students a real chance to learn English. The most important thing, she says, is to make sure everyone is on board.

“You have to have a board that truly is behind it, that’s committed to it,” she emphasizes. “Change is not always easy. Teachers, principals, and parents all need to be supportive of the concept and have an understanding of what instruction in the classrooms is going to look like.”

Many school districts across California that have been resistant are finally starting to follow Proposition 227’s mandate. Those that haven’t, like San José Unified in Northern California, have conspicuously held back average progress statewide. But the law itself doesn’t say much about the nuts and bolts of a structured English immersion program.

Educators that have experience with such programs can provide the best help to districts that want to implement them. Orange Unified’s Ochoa encourages educators to communicate with their peers who may already have done much of the legwork. “One of the most important questions to ask is, what curriculum are they are going to use?”

Orange Unified, for example, had trouble finding suitable textbooks at first. Most textbook companies are national, while many parts of the country haven’t had a need to provide much immersion education. Educators beginning immersion programs would be wise to seek out experts like Ochoa, who has done a lot of research on what works best.

School districts seeking to implement successful immersion programs can learn many lessons from districts like Atwater and Orange Unified. Educators there have put much thought and energy into providing the best education possible for some of the most needy students in our schools.

## **Useful Resources: Select Publications Discussing Structured English Immersion**

*The ABC's of English Immersion: A Teacher's Guide*. Washington, DC: Center for Equal Opportunity, 2001. Available online at [www.ceousa.org/abc.html](http://www.ceousa.org/abc.html).

Kevin Clark, "From Primary Language Instruction to English Immersion: How Five California Districts Made the Switch," *READ Abstracts*, June 1999.

Glenn, Charles L., "Improving Schooling for Language Minority Children: A Research Addenda," *READ Abstracts*, May 1997.

Glenn, Charles L., *Language Minority Children in School: A Comparative Study of Twelve Nations*. New York: Garland Press, 1996.

Haver, Johanna, *Structured English Immersion: A Step-by-Step Guide for K-6 Teachers and Administrators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2003.

Jesness, Jerry, *Teaching English Language Learners K-12*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2004.

Porter, Rosalie P. and Kevin Clark, *Language and Literacy for English Learners: Grades 7-12*. Longmont, Colorado: Sopris West, 2004.

Christine H. Rossell, Ph.D., "Dismantling Bilingual Education, Implementing English Immersion: The California Initiative," Revised February 20, 2002, Public Policy Institute of California.

Christine H. Rossell, Ph.D, and Julia Kuder, "Meta-Murky: A Rebuttal to Recent Meta-Analyses of Bilingual Education," Revised April 27, 2005, originally presented at the Programme on Intercultural Conflicts and Societal Integration (AKI), Berlin, November , 2004.