

# spotlight

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## TEACHING IMMIGRANTS ENGLISH

Direct Instruction Is the Best Way to Teach Limited English Proficient Students

**S U M M A R Y :** The number of limited English proficient (LEP) students has been increasing for years, but the state's public schools lack a systematic and proven program to teach English to these children. Reading scores among students who are learning English remain low, especially among high school students. The best way to teach English to North Carolina's LEP students is through universal training in and adoption of Direct Instruction methods, which is a proven way to teach English as a second language.

The Department of Public Instruction maintains that they cannot offer a precise count of the number of illegal immigrant children that attend North Carolina schools. Nevertheless, a Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise report estimated that 45 percent of North Carolina's Hispanic population do not have legal residency. In 2004-2005, the state spent \$467 million on schooling for 101,380 Hispanic students. Using the Kenan estimate, this means that the state spent \$210 million on schooling for around 45,600 illegal immigrant students, or 3.4 percent of the total student population.<sup>1</sup>

Under *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), the U.S. Supreme Court held that illegal immigrant children are entitled to equal protection under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. Accordingly, the majority of the Court maintained that, "The undocumented status of these children does not establish a sufficient rational basis for denying them benefits that the State affords other residents."<sup>2</sup> This means that school districts in North Carolina and elsewhere must provide all children, regardless of immigration status, a free and uniform education. Thus, it is not a question of *whether* the state should provide illegal immigrant children an education but of *what kind* of education it should provide.

Both immigrant families and policy makers agree that, in order to make a lasting contribution to North Carolina's economy, immigrant children must become fluent in English. Thus, the question is this: *How does the educational system most efficiently teach limited English proficient (LEP) students English?* Rather than use the instructional model recommended by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, school districts should implement a system-

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atic program of Direct Instruction that immerses students in a both the native language and English at different times during the school day.

### The Growth of the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Student Population

Most limited English proficient (LEP) students speak Spanish as their primary language. As of 2002-2003, 78 percent of LEP students spoke Spanish, while a number of European and Asian dialects comprised the remaining 22 percent. Overall, a relative small percentage of North Carolina students receive English as a second language (ESL) services. The Department of Public Instruction reports that about 5 percent of the student population is limited English proficient, but that percentage has been increasing in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

There has been a significant increase in the number of English as a second language (ESL) classes. Over the last five years, there has been a 56 percent increase in the number of elementary, middle, and high school ESL classes. This was due to the dramatic increase in high school ESL classes, which nearly doubled over the last five years. Elementary ESL classes outnumbered both middle and high school classes. Last year, there were nearly 3,800 elementary school ESL classes but only 737 middle and 1,180 high school classes across the state.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, enrollment increases drive the demand for additional ESL classes. There has been a nearly 50 percent increase in the number of LEP students enrolled in ESL classes over the last five years. To be classified as LEP, students must score below “Superior” on at least one section of the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) Proficiency Test (IPT). This growth was a product of increased demand for high school ESL classes, which increased its LEP student population by 79 percent over the last five years. Similar growth has been seen in elementary ESL courses, which added over 7,600 students, a 55 percent increase. There has been little growth in enrollment for middle school ESL classes, growing by only two percent in the last five years.<sup>5</sup>

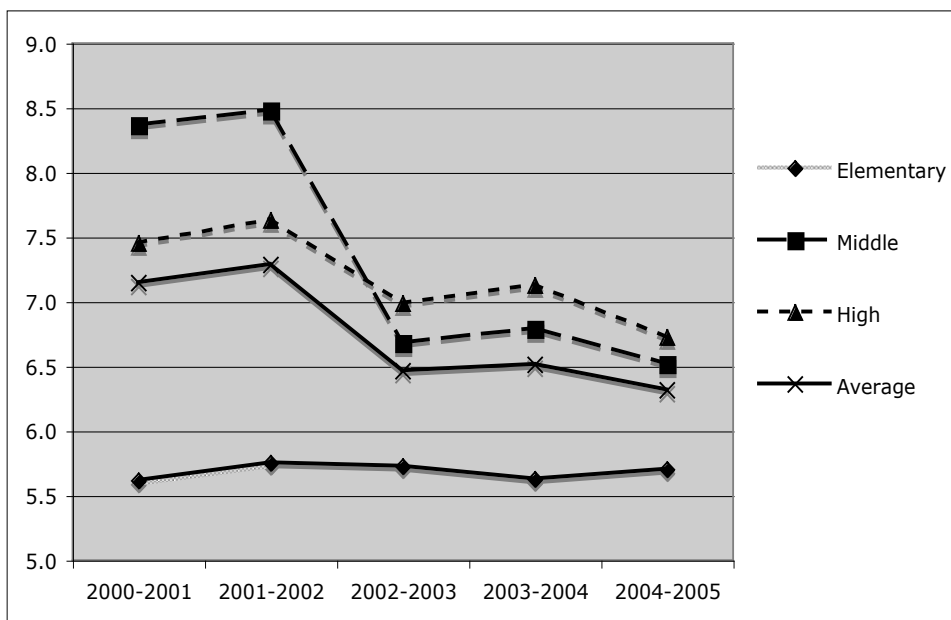
Despite increasing demand, the average ESL class size declined slightly over the last five years (see Figure 1). In 2004-2005, there was an average of 6.3 students per class, down from 7.1 students in 2000-2001. Elementary classes have remained steady, averaging around 5.7 students per class. Both middle and high school classes average around 6.5 students per class, a decrease of 1 to 2 students over five years.<sup>6</sup>

As the number of LEP students increase, expenditures for English language acquisition students have also increased. Over the last three years, federal expenditures for language acquisition programs in North Carolina have increased by 35 percent, from \$33.7 million in 2003-2004 to \$45.3 million in 2005-2006. Likewise, state money has increase by 26 percent, from \$7.5 million in 2003 to \$9.5 million in 2005. For each LEP student, this amounted to an additional expenditure of \$1,367 per student in 2003-2004 and \$1,370 per student in 2004-2005. The state does not report local expenditures for English language acquisition programs.<sup>7</sup>

### Student Performance

Despite years of very small class sizes, in 2004-2005 LEP students as a group failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind law for elementary/middle and high school reading and math. The performance of LEP students in elementary/middle school math was the highest of the four AYP measures. The percent-

FIGURE 1: ESL AVERAGE CLASS SIZES, 2000-2005



age of students scoring at or above proficient was only 3.5 percentage points below the AYP target. Elementary/middle school reading was over 12 percentage points below the AYP target. Likewise, the percentage of proficient LEP students in 10th grade math was around 12 percent below the AYP target.<sup>8</sup> (See Figure 2.)

The problem lies in 10th grade reading. LEP students failed to meet the very low AYP target pass rate of 35.4 percent. Only 10.9 percent of LEP students scored at or above proficient in 10th grade reading (see Figure 2). The U.S. Department of Education permits the scores of first-year LEP student to be excluded from AYP calculations, so the low scores are not due to students who are learning English for the first time. With the dramatic increase in high school ESL students, reform efforts must focus on better preparing high school students fluency with English.

Disaggregated test scores identify the problem. Students who have been in ESL classes for over two years perform worse than students who exited ESL classes after two or more years of instruction (see Figure 3). The average scale score of former LEP students is nearly identical to those who have never been identified as LEP students, suggesting that longer stays in ESL programs may not be beneficial for all students.<sup>9</sup>

### State ESL Standards

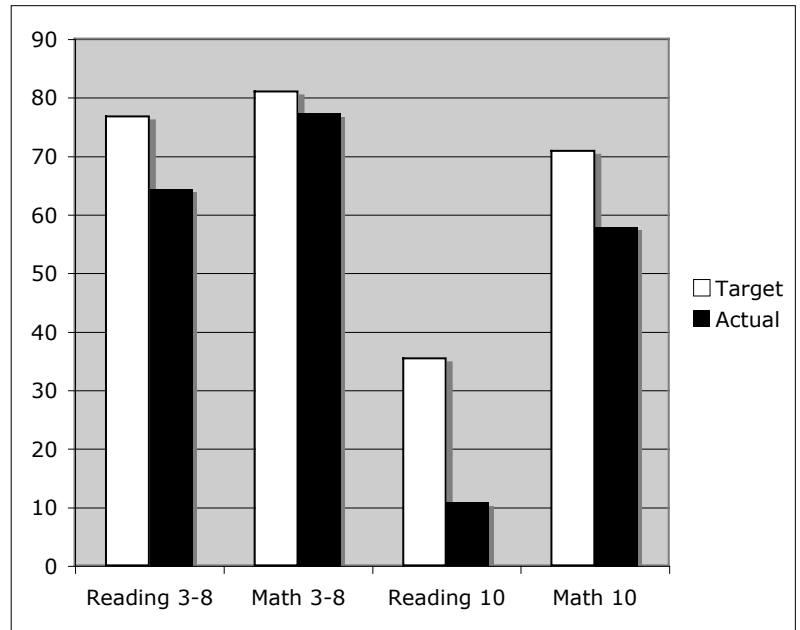
According to the Department of Public Instruction, school districts are free to use any instructional model they wish to teach LEP students, but state recommends that schools use the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP).<sup>10</sup> Approximately 13 school districts (including Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Wake public schools) report using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, a series of instructional strategies for teaching English to LEP students.<sup>11</sup> The SIOP program is the only one that is fully aligned with state standards.<sup>12</sup>

Astonishingly, it is not entirely clear what SIOP is or how it works. According to SIOP researchers,

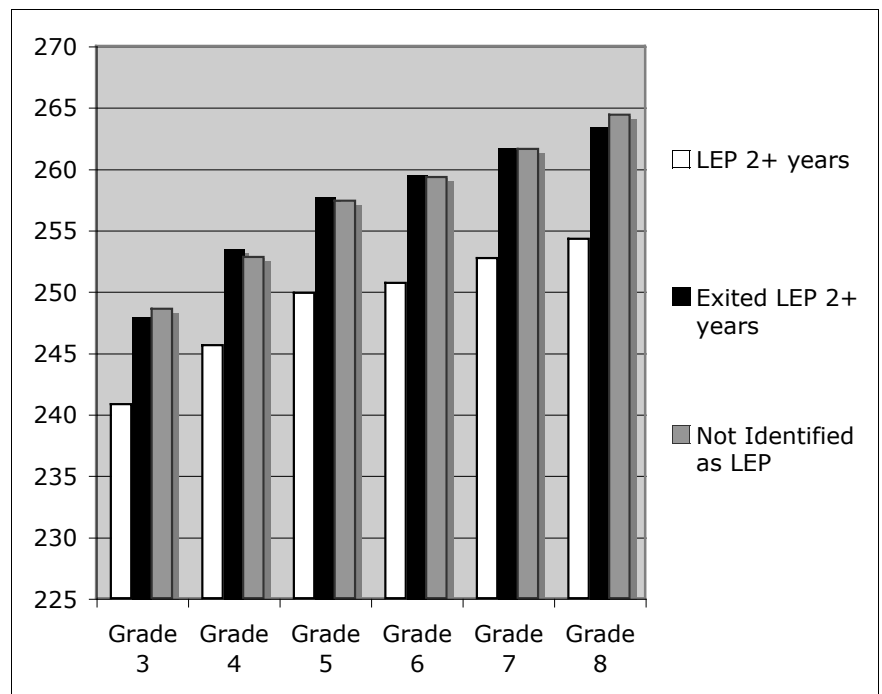
The [SIOP] model offers a framework for selecting and organizing techniques and strategies and facilitates the integration of district or state level standards for English as a second language and for specific content areas.<sup>13</sup>

Although details are difficult to gather from this definition, SIOP simply appears

**Figure 2: Adequate Yearly Progress Target and Actual Percentage of Proficient LEP Students, 2004-2005 (By Class/Grade Level)**



**FIGURE 3: LEP STUDENT READING SCALE SCORES BY LEP STATUS, 2004-2005**



to be education jargon for a program that encourages teachers to teach using many different types of supplementary materials (graphs, models, objects, films) and requires them to modify their speech to accommodate the students' proficiency level. Administrators are encouraged to receive training in SIOP so they can use the SIOP evaluation instrument to evaluate the performance of ESL teachers that use the model.

Even SIOP researchers admit that no two teachers use the SIOP model the same way. Their own research has shown that "a great deal of variability exists in the design of SI courses and the delivery of SI lessons, even among trained teachers and within the same schools."<sup>14</sup> Given this variability, it is impossible to determine the effectiveness or usefulness of SIOP methods. Indeed, our schools should be using a research-based program like Direct Instruction (DI) to teacher LEP students.

### **Direct Instruction**

The one consistent finding in education research is that Direct Instruction is the best way to teach English to limited English proficient students. As the name implies, Direct Instruction is a teaching method based upon explicit and systematic teaching of the subject matter. Teachers follow a script, allowing them to keep students continually engaged by moving at a faster pace than traditional methods of instruction. To address differences in students' needs, students are grouped according to ability and are assessed frequently. Teachers that use this method must undergo extensive training, mostly because teacher education programs seldom train students to use Direct Instruction teaching methods.<sup>15</sup>

In general, Direct Instruction is one of the most effective ways to teach children, including LEP students, how to read. "Project Follow Through" was a 30-year, one-billion-dollar assessment of 12 teaching methods that evaluated 75,000 children at 180 sites. Project Follow Through researchers found that students taught using Direct Instruction outperformed students taught using any other teaching methods. Although Direct Instruction has been found to be effective by countless studies, much of the education establishment rejects it because they incorrectly perceive it to be a teacher-centered method based on rote memorization.<sup>16</sup>

A "best-evidence synthesis" of forty-five years of experimental studies on reading programs for LEP students concluded that Direct Instruction produced strong, consistent, and lasting effects on reading achievement.<sup>17</sup> In addition to this finding, researchers Robert Slavin and Alan Cheung of the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) found strong support for "paired bilingual strategies," a reading program that immerses students in both the native language and English at different times during the day. According to the research, this means that teachers should use Direct Instruction teaching methods to conduct reading immersion classes in both English and the native language.<sup>18</sup>

Slavin and Cheung recommend using a paired bilingual strategy as a two-way, mutually beneficial program to immerse limited English proficient students in reading classes with native speakers. This novel approach would allow English-only speakers to begin an accelerated foreign language program alongside native speakers. Depending on the grade level of instruction, schools could integrate English classrooms in a similar way.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, there is no evidence that schools should delay students' instruction in English. According to Slavin and Cheung, "we did not find any convincing evidence to support the idea that English language learners need to wait before beginning English reading instruction, if they are also receiving reading instruction in the native language in the early years."<sup>20</sup> In this way, LEP students can begin paired bilingual instruction almost immediately upon entering school.

## Conclusion: Begin by Changing the Language of the Debate

Instead of using SIOP to teach LEP students in ESL classes, DPI should direct LEAs to follow the recommendations of CRESPAR researchers and use DI to ensure that LEP students score a “Superior” rating on IDEA’s IPT exam.

If you can decode the last sentence, this paper successfully initiated you into the acronym-rich, often confusing, world of teaching English as a second language. One Department of Public Instruction consultant lists 12 acronyms that parents and educators should know, but that is just the beginning.

Any improvements in the ESL instructional program must be preceded by an effort, led by the Department of Public Instruction, to provide clear communication between schools, parents, and the public. Otherwise, how can parents of LEP students, many of whom are not fluent in English, have any understanding of — or ownership in — their child’s English language development?

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## Notes

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2. *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202 (1982), <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=457&invol=202>.
3. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI), “Student Groups,” <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/nclb/faqs/studentgroups>.
4. North Carolina DPI, “North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile,” 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Calculations based on the number of ESL classes and the number of students served by ESL classes as reported in the Statistical Profile’s “Course Membership Summary” for 2001 through 2005.
7. North Carolina DPI, Financial and Business Services, “Highlights of the North Carolina Public School Budget,” 2004, 2005, and 2006.
8. North Carolina DPI, “2005 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Results by Subgroup,” <http://ayp.ncpublicschools.org/nclb2005/AypSchool.jsp>.
9. North Carolina DPI, “The North Carolina State Testing Results” (The Green Book), 2004-2005, “August 2005.
10. North Carolina DPI, “Standard Course of Study and Grade Level Competencies, English Language Development K-12,” pp. 10-11.
11. See SIOP Institute website, <http://www.siopinstitute.net/map.asp?state=nc>, which lists Alamance-Burlington, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Harnett, Pitt, Surry, Chatham, Asheboro, Lee, Johnston, and New Hanover as school districts attending SIOP seminars. The N.C. Department of Public Instruction is also listed as a participant. The North Carolina DPI website lists ESL specialists from Alamance-Burlington, Asheboro City, Catawba, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Hickory, Johnston, Lee, Surry, Wake, and Wilson public schools as participants on the NC SIOP Committee. See [http://community.learnnc.org/dpi/esl/archives/2005/07/nc\\_guide\\_to\\_the.php](http://community.learnnc.org/dpi/esl/archives/2005/07/nc_guide_to_the.php).
12. North Carolina DPI, “NC Guide to the SIOP Model,” [http://community.learnnc.org/dpi/esl/archives/2005/07/nc\\_guide\\_to\\_the.php](http://community.learnnc.org/dpi/esl/archives/2005/07/nc_guide_to_the.php).
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20. *Ibid.*, 40.