

Voices from the Field: Bilingual Educators Speak Candidly About Proposition 227

Deborah K. Palmer and Eugene E. García
University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a mini-study on the reactions of California bilingual educators to the implementation of Proposition 227. Overall, the concerns of these educators are consistent with those reported in other studies of educators throughout California. Teachers worry about the erosion of primary language programs, about the imposition of English-only standardized testing, and about the lack of clear leadership on policy and practice for language minority students. Administrators are concerned mainly with issues of interpretation of the law, of accountability, and of communication with parents and community. The authors conclude that, not surprisingly, teachers and administrators continue to be pragmatic, serving their students as best they can despite adversity.

When California voters passed Proposition 227 in June of 1998, they passed into law a series of mandates the intent of which was to affect directly classroom experiences for language minority children statewide by forcing greater emphasis on the acquisition of English. To that end, the new law contained within it several direct references to classroom practices. It required students to be instructed “overwhelmingly” in English. For young children who were acquiring English, it mandated a “structured English immersion, or sheltered English immersion” program in which “nearly all classroom instruction is in English but with the curriculum and presentation designed for children who are learning the language.” Finally, the new law specified that children must be placed “for a period of not less than 30 days during that school year in an English language classroom” before a parental waiver would be able to move the child into an “alternative” (i.e., bilingual) program.

The vague nature of these mandates did not stop them from becoming part of the California Education Code (sections 300-340). In an effort to clarify the definitions of such expressions as “overwhelmingly,” “reasonable fluency,” and “nearly all,” and to build a clearer picture of the structured English immersion program model, the California Department of Education published a number of documents, including state regulations (Title 5, Division 1, Chapter 11, 12/30/98) and guidelines (Educating English Learners for the Twenty-First Century, Report of the Proposition 227 Task Force, 1999). Yet, confusion remains around these areas of the law, leaving much of the

interpretation up to districts, schools, and ultimately, individual teachers in their classrooms.

The openness of the law for interpretation has created a wide array of unintended consequences. A law which many feared would sound a death knell for bilingual programs statewide has, in many locations, gone virtually unnoticed. In some instances, it has allowed for a rallying of forces to create additional programs and services for language minority children who had previously been underserved. In many places, it has had the consequence intended by its authors, of inhibiting or dissolving primary language support and instruction for language minority students.

As a group of researchers at UC Berkeley, we chose to track the consequences of this new policy. We designed our study to examine the wide variety of interpretations of the new law. Thus, we chose to interview people affected by the law: district representatives, principals, and teachers in a stratified random sample of 40 districts statewide which serve greater than 25% limited English speaking (LEP) children. (See García & Curry, this volume, for a more detailed description of the study's design.) As of March 2000, we had completed approximately one quarter of our data collection. In our preliminary findings, we were identifying three distinct categories of interpretation. Some districts, due to a diverse mix of languages, had never implemented bilingual education but rather had in place a model akin to the new law's mandated "structured English immersion" program to support LEP children in their academics while they learn English without use of the primary language. These districts suffered little change. A second group of districts actually dismantled bilingual education programs, eliminated primary language instruction, and implemented some version of the structured English immersion program, as directed by the law. In the districts in which this took place, teachers and administrators reported the most upheaval. The third category of interpretation which we isolated was the most complex; these were the districts which attempted to offer some variety of programs for English language learners (ELLs). While many of these latter districts seemed to emphasize English acquisition more and more at the expense of their bilingual programs, we did identify a few districts which appeared to offer a variety of programs on equal footing, and a few districts in which bilingual education remained prevalent, apparently by parent choice.

Yet, while our random sample was providing us with the variety of interpretations and reactions to the law among those directly affected, we felt there was still an important piece missing. We wished to gain access to the perspective of the professionals in the field of bilingual education itself, to that subset of teachers and administrators who have worked within the bilingual education programs which, ultimately, were the target of Proposition 227. How were they reacting to the changes imposed by the new law? We decided to go to the professionals and ask them directly.

On March 20, 2000, we presented our preliminary findings to a group of educators and administrators at the annual conference of the California Association of Bilingual Educators in San Francisco. This is a conference which gathers over 5,000 professionals in the field of bilingual education. We titled our session “Research Portraits on Proposition 227: Help us Define the Issues.” Our audience was approximately 30 teachers, 20 administrators, and a few parents of bilingual students. After presenting the above preliminary findings, we broke the audience into three discussion groups: two groups of teachers, and one of administrators (the parents joined the teachers’ groups). We asked participants to give us their views on what has happened to schools and districts with the passage of Proposition 227 and the implementation of the new laws. Specifically, we began the discussion by asking them:

1. What was your district’s response to Proposition 227?
2. Is it different from the categories we have described?
3. What would you call your district’s implementation form?

We ran the discussion openly, allowing participants to bring it in whatever direction they wished. We ended the discussion by asking, “What questions could we ask to ensure we get at your experience?”

Teachers and administrators all spoke passionately and candidly about the wrenching changes their schools were undergoing. They repeatedly expressed their gratitude for our questions, explaining that they had felt silenced, ignored, and misunderstood throughout the political debate in 1998. As they pointed out to us, it has often seemed as though the voices from the field of bilingual education itself are discredited when it comes to debating the proper course of action to assist English language learners. In one teacher’s passionate words:

I don’t think there is any person alive who could be so misunderstood and so in the public’s eye. Bilingual educators are the bad guys and there are a lot of things that we did wrong no doubt. We are the villains. (interview)

After our discussion, we asked participants to take a few moments to write down what they saw as the key issues in the implementation of Proposition 227. Below is an overview of the key issues these members of the profession of bilingual educators identified in their comments, spoken and written.¹

Teachers

Not surprisingly, bilingual teachers expressed feeling threatened by the passage of the new law. One teacher asserted, “Prop 227 was like a slap in the face for bilingual teachers. A ‘ha-ha we won now you have to do what we told you to anyhow.’ It’s been a painful transition.” Another teacher, who was new to the field and submitted this comment anonymously to us, confided that s/he has “sensed that bilingual education is a bad word” in her/his district.

Teachers told us that the support infrastructure for their programs was eroding, even in those cases where programs were allowed to remain intact. As one teacher lamented, “Due in part to lack of waivers and to bilingual teacher apathy or fatalism, the program is little by little falling apart.” The teachers offered concrete examples to support their concerns:

1. It has become more difficult for teachers to locate primary language teaching materials.
2. The “BAC” parent committee in support of bilingual education has been disbanded by one district without explanation.
3. One district has splintered its bilingual population by opening a new school and by moving another school into a multi-track year round schedule, such that it is now virtually impossible to collect enough waivers to run bilingual education classrooms there.
4. Other districts have suspended professional development in primary language instruction, preferring instead to focus on English language development.
5. Students are being transitioned into English-only programs years earlier in the push to improve their English skills.
6. Districts are adopting scripted, highly structured language arts programs such as Open Court (SRA/McGraw Hill, 2000), which in these teachers’ views do not adapt well to the particular needs of the language minority child learning English.
7. In one district which suspended all use of primary language materials, materials in English were not readily available. A teacher explains:
We were not allowed to use our brand new Spanish classroom sets of basals and workbooks. We were not allowed to use Spanish, and yet there was nothing comparable with English to replace the Spanish language arts program. We were without proper materials.
8. Programs seem more vulnerable to the principals’ whims than they once were. In one teacher’s words, “There’s still some resistance among individual principals; when they don’t support ELD [English language development], SEI [structured English immersion or bilingual], then it becomes difficult to implement.”

In general, these teachers seem to feel that their programs continue to exist only by chance, and that the meager support they receive could be suspended at any time. One teacher explained, “Although during the past two years, the district level has pushed waivers, there seems to be less and less support.” Another confided, “I am always worried about next year. What will be the status of bilingual education?” A third told us, “There is no direction from the state. A teacher leaves and a program falls apart. It’s crazy!”

For these teachers, the erosion of their programs is a problem because it spells more likely failure for their English-learning students. They fear that

their students have already begun to fail with the lack of support. One teacher shared her belief that this new law will produce “A whole generation of uneducated, low self-esteem kids.” Another worried that some of her students, forced to learn in English, “seem stuck, not moving forward . . . such slow progress.” One teacher expressed the fear that children will fall behind in academic subjects without the support they previously had received in their primary language. Another feared that students would not be properly tracked and assessed when they are seeing “Three to four different educators and para-educators per day” merely to receive support for language learning which had previously been provided by their BCLAD teacher within the regular bilingual classroom. English language learners (ELLs) are being labeled as special needs with learning disabilities more and more, according to one teacher, which to her was evidence of the schools’ lack of attention to their language needs. Another teacher sadly reported that educators in her district were “promoting a remedial bilingual education model” by telling parents their children were “ready to go into structured English immersion,” as though bilingual education was only for the not-yet-ready.

The most commonly expressed concern was with the now-required SAT-9 testing in English beginning in second grade. Also known as the STAR test, this is a statewide standardized test required of all California public school students annually beginning in the second grade, regardless of English level. The SAT-9 is the single most important indicator in a statewide school ranking known as the API. The teachers argued that this test, because it is designed for native English speakers, did not give educators useful information about their limited English proficient students’ progress. In one teacher’s words:

I don’t feel the SAT-9 serves any purpose other than that the children are frustrated. I know the reason why they do it, but our kids score low and it is to be expected because they have limited language. (interview)

This test, reiterated many, is contributing to a further erosion of the use of primary language to assist student learning, resulting in a push to transition children to English instruction earlier and earlier. One teacher explained that, due to the API and its reliance on SAT-9 testing, “Our bilingual maintenance programs are turning into early transitional programs.” Informed another teacher, “English language learners are expected to perform as well as the school average. When they don’t perform they are considered for retention.”

Several participants pointed out an interesting twist. While bilingual education programs are being dismantled or eroded, dual immersion programs are thriving. Dual immersion programs, becoming increasingly popular in California, attempt to provide high-caliber primary language instruction to non-English-speaking students while at the same time offering instruction in a second language to English speakers. One teacher told us that a dual immersion program was the only Spanish language instruction left in her district, and the waiting list was long. Another teacher expressed her view

that this indicated that “Anglo parents’ wishes were honored and Latino parents’” were not.

A common theme among many of these bilingual teachers’ responses was the feeling of upheaval and confusion over the vast differences in interpretation from one classroom, school, or district to the next. They perceived a lack of clear leadership, either at the state level or in their schools and districts. As one teacher expressed, “It seems Proposition 227 has been more of a dirt devil than a thunderstorm. Many programs are in upheaval and teachers and districts are in a spin and throwing up lots of dirt along the way.” This lack of leadership leads to complications such as the placement of transfer children into appropriate programs, as expressed by this teacher: “We have received transfer students who need primary language instruction but have had Kindergarten in English so we’re faced with where to put them.” One teacher reported a similar problem occurring within her own school, when some teachers pursued parent waivers (to teach students in the primary language) more vigorously than others. She explains, “I had many more waivers last year. But this year the complication was that I had a group of students who had not received bilingual services in the first grade. . . I can’t do it all alone.” (interview) A lack of clear leadership translates into a lack of consistent programs for students, and this in turn appears to lead to programs which are more and more English dominant.

During our discussion, several teachers expressed remorse for not having worked harder earlier on to communicate their programs’ goals and students’ progress to parents and community members, thereby fending off such an attack as Proposition 227. Others admitted that their programs had weaknesses before. However, in one teacher’s words, “English immersion didn’t work years prior to bilingual education—thus the pendulum swings.” Proposition 227, according to these teachers, is no solution. As one teacher in a school with a slowly eroding program explained:

I don’t think, at least at our school, we will ever go back to a (full) bilingual program. . . I think eventually it is just going to fall by the wayside. For teachers, that in a way makes our job easier. You work in one language. But there are people like myself that feel that this for our students has not been the best solution at all. (interview)

Administrators

Administrators involved in bilingual education shared many of the teachers’ concerns, although they framed their concerns differently. Administrators referred mainly to issues of interpretation of the law, of accountability, and of communication with parents and community.

School leaders are looking for guidance from the state on questions of interpretation of the law. In one principal’s words:

At the core of implementing 227 are the vast array of interpretations of the law and how those interpretations are conveyed to the staff and parent community. What is ‘overwhelmingly’ English? What is structured English immersion?

As this last question demonstrates, the participants in our discussion were particularly concerned about the lack of sufficient models of the mandated “structured English immersion” program for teaching English to language minority students. One administrator suggested that we investigate the “variability of district designs of SEI,” which he had seen range at least from “zero to 40% Spanish.” Nearly all participants expressed confusion over these terms and programs and over the wide range of interpretations in the field.

Echoing the concerns voiced by teachers, administrators also feared the consequences of requiring SAT-9 testing in English, and particularly of tying that testing to school evaluation in the form of the API. The state’s system of evaluation, because it is offered only in English and required of all students, seems to support English-only instruction rather than bilingual education. These principals saw this as shortsighted, because it will not meet the needs of English learners, nor hold students in bilingual programs accountable for their learning. As one principal asks, “Those students who are receiving bilingual instruction—how will we be able to show their progress?” This form of evaluation in English “works against true choice,” explained one administrator, because if a school chooses to educate students in their primary language first, their test scores will be lower and their API results will suffer. English-only testing will promote “diluted L1 instruction,” explains another, encouraging teachers to push English rather than provide a rich curriculum in the student’s primary language. As one representative administrator told us, “It is imperative that any research related to post-227 conditions take into consideration the oppressive result of the API ranking in the state.”

The third issue administrators emphasized was the question of communicating with parents. Proposition 227 allowed parents, through a waiver, to choose an “alternative” (i.e., bilingual) program for their children. This stipulation of parent choice in the new law poses a challenge to administrators: they must now comprehensibly explain the various programs offered at their schools to limited English-speaking parents. If they are maintaining a bilingual program, they must convince all parents to come to their schools to sign waivers. If they are running English language programs, they must find ways to include these parents in the education of their children in a language the parents do not understand. Many described their attempts to open up more spaces for parent participation. One expressed concern about “parent ability to make such a big choice,” arguing that the parents at his school “want to trust us to make a recommendation.” One administrator reported success: “The positive effect of 227 in my district was a significant increase in English learner parent participation.” Several leaders expressed their frustration with the complicated logistics engendered by the new law’s system for parent

choice. As Proposition 227 mandated that the first 30 days of school must occur in English while parents are given the option to choose among alternatives, the logistical issues of forming classes, ordering materials, and hiring qualified staff to run the programs in the ways parents choose become even more complicated at the last minute.

Administrators, like teachers, expressed frustration with being forced to carry out programs based on a theory of language learning which runs counter to their own training and beliefs. Said one district administrator, “The government is not giving me a choice.” Overall, however, despite frustrations and philosophical differences with the law, administrators and teachers as professional educators seemed resolved to do the very best they could for the students in their charge under current conditions. In one administrator’s words:

The prevailing feeling (in my school) is that bilingual education is a necessary and positive thing for kids. (Proposition 227) really didn’t do anything except cause us a lot of unnecessary work and time that could be better spent servicing kids. . . The teachers and I accept that (Proposition 227) is the law and we have to do it. We just wanted to know what we could do and what we couldn’t do, and that was really murky at first.

How These Results Compare with Other Findings

The stories and attitudes these teachers and administrators expressed matched fairly accurately the picture which had been emerging in our research and other research statewide. This sample reflects statewide research in these ways:

1. Standardized testing was a main concern of all professionals, and they constantly connected testing and Proposition 227 as both being behind a statewide shift toward English Only (Gándara, P., Maxwell-Jolly, J., Stritikus, T., Curry, J., García, E., Asato, J., Gutiérrez, K. 2000).
2. Participants agreed that the policy has had a huge impact on classroom practices and on students, but they had a difficult time isolating the impact of Proposition 227 from that of other recent changes, such as the standards movement, the end of social promotion, class-size reduction of the primary grades, and the statewide push for early literacy and phonics (Gándara et al., 2000).
3. Lack of materials and resources was identified as an obstacle to successful implementation of the shift toward more English instruction (Viramontes & Alamillo, this volume).
4. Teachers and schools who had stronger programs and were better prepared in their students’ primary language were more likely to maintain these programs, although they were careful to remain within district definitions of phrases such as “overwhelmingly” or “nearly all” (Gándara et al., 2000 and García & Stritikus, 2000).

5. In both the random and CABE (California Association for Bilingual Education) sample of teachers, it was common to see teachers engaged in creative means to overcome what they viewed as the “handicap” of the new restrictions while still meeting high-pressure demands for standards in their schools and districts (García & Stritikus, 2000).

This sample did differ from our statewide random sample in some ways, particularly in attitude toward the new law. In our random sample of respondents, a substantial minority was positive about the new law, and had voted for the proposition. A significant number also claimed to have been unaffected by the new law. By contrast, none of the professional bilingual educators at CABE claimed that the law had no affect on them. Further, while many did admit to faults in their programs prior to Proposition 227, and some were willing to allow that Proposition 227 has had some unexpected positive consequences, none of the participants asserted that the change has been an overall positive one for them or for their students. In fact, the CABE professionals all condemned the new law; some were quite forceful in their denunciation (e.g., “It’s just a bad law; “It’s racist;” “This blatantly discriminatory law”).

Despite these differences in opinion, in many ways, the concerns expressed by these participants were consistent with those uncovered in random samples, interviews, and observations statewide. While these teachers have strong opinions about public policy as it affects their students, they appear to react as professionals: to seek the best solution within current circumstances, and to remain open to different possibilities. Policymakers can and should pay attention to our professionals in the field. As one teacher explained, the most difficult thing about the implementation of Proposition 227 has been:

Simply . . . having educational policies imposed without . . . the expertise and background . . . Sometimes policy changes are informed by research and sometimes they are not, and I felt that this particular one was not informed [by] research and best educational practices. It is hard to accept that. That people outside the classroom decide what is best for people inside the classroom. For me personally, [the hardest thing has been] feeling that I am not doing the best job that could be done for the students and not having any choice about it. (interview)

References

- California Department of Education. (1999). *Proposition 227 survey, interim report*. Sacramento: CDE.
- California Department of Education. (1999). *Educating English learners for the twenty-first century: The report of the Proposition 227 task force*. Sacramento: CDE.

- Darling-Hammond, L. (1990). Instructional policy into practice: The power of the bottom over the top. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 12*, 339–347.
- Gándara, P., Maxwell-Jolly, J., Stritikus, T., Curry, J., Garcia, E., Asato, J., Gutiérrez, K. (2000). *The initial impact of Proposition 227 on the instruction of English learners*. Davis: University of California Linguistic Minority Research Institute Education Policy Center.
- García, E., & Stritikus, T. (2000, April). *Education of limited English proficient students in California schools: An assessment of the influence of Proposition 227 on selected teachers and classrooms*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Berkeley, CA.

Endnotes

- ¹ Where cited “interview,” some quotes are taken from selected telephone interviews with teachers and principals in our random sample who matched the CAFE group.