

## **TESOL Response to the Arizona Department of Education Study on Student Achievement in Structured English Immersion Programs**

On August 5, 2004, the Arizona Department of Education released a draft report of the study titled *The Effects of Bilingual Education Programs and Structured English Immersion Programs on Student Achievement: A Large-Scale Comparison*, which compares the 2002–2003 performance on the Stanford 9 achievement test of students in bilingual education programs with those in structured English immersion (SEI) programs. In an accompanying statement, the Arizona Department of Education suggests that the findings of the study support the idea that bilingual education programs are “educationally inferior” to SEI programs (which were mandated in accordance with the voter-approved Proposition 203 in 2000).

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL), the global professional association for English language educators, represents more than 13,000 members and 90 affiliates in over 120 countries. TESOL’s mission is to ensure excellence in English language teaching to speakers of other languages, and as such values accessible, high-quality education for all learners. Because this study is being used to support a controversial education policy that is part of a national debate in the United States over bilingual education, TESOL has concerns about the following issues relating to the study and its conclusions:

1. **The study offers no definition of *bilingual education*.** The study purports to show that English language learners in one type of program (SEI) outperform those in another (bilingual education). However, the term *bilingual education* can refer to any of a number of different methods used to instruct English language learners, such as dual-language immersion, transitional bilingual education, and even pull-out English as second language programs, and is often used to collectively refer to all these instructional methods. The study offers no explanation of the exact types of programs being compared.
2. **The study offers no consideration of the instructional history of the students prior to the 2002–2003 school year.** The study offers a snapshot of academic performance at a particular moment in time. The study does not take into account the prior instructional history of the students and thus fails to consider the numerous factors that can impact academic performance. Some of these factors include the number of years students had been in U.S. schools, whether students in SEI programs had previously been in bilingual programs (or vice versa), and the educational opportunities afforded the students prior to coming to the United States. Because English language learners represent

## **TESOL Response to Arizona Department of Education Study (continued)**

tremendous cultural, linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic diversity, it cannot be assumed that these factors would be uniform across the population being studied.

3. **The study offers no consideration of the multiple influences on language learning and academic achievement.** It is well documented by research in the field of second language acquisition that a number of cognitive factors and individual social and attitudinal variables such as motivation, learning styles, and degree of social assimilation impact language learning, academic achievement, and type of instruction (Ellis, 1994; Gass and Selinker, 2001). Therefore, valid research into the effect of a type of instruction must consider in much more detail who the learners are. Without knowing more about the students whose scores are being compared, it is nearly impossible to know whether these students would have actually benefited from a different type of instruction.
4. **The research is not designed to investigate causal relationships.** The study, as reported, is simply a statistical description and analysis of standardized test results, and not an investigation into the causal relationship between a particular type of instruction and a particular set of learning outcomes. The interpretation of the data presented in the study, which suggests one particular methodology is superior to another, is speculative and based on a very high level of inference. In other words, analysis of standardized test results is a very primitive tool if the main objective is to study how well students learn under different methods of instruction.

In its *Research Agenda* (2000), TESOL calls for much greater support for longitudinal research designed to investigate methods of instruction and multiple influences on student achievement. As stated in its *Position Statement on Local Flexibility in the Education of English Language Learners* (2003), TESOL advocates that education policy should be based on sound pedagogical principles and research, and not politics or ideologies. Moreover, TESOL advocates against “one size fits all” approaches to English language instruction.

### **References**

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## **TESOL Response to Arizona Department of Education Study (continued)**

### **Resources**

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Chung, A., & Slavin, R. (2003). Effective reading programs for English language learners: A best-evidence synthesis. Baltimore, MD: The Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, Johns Hopkins University. Available at <http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report66.pdf>.

McSwan, J., Stockford, S. M., Mahoney, K. S., Thompson, M. S., & DiCerbo, K. E. (2002). *Programs for English learners: A longitudinal exploration of program sequences and academic achievement in Arizona*. Report prepared for Arizona Department of Education. Available at [http://www.public.asu.edu/~macswan/ade/ade\\_report.pdf](http://www.public.asu.edu/~macswan/ade/ade_report.pdf).

Founded in 1966, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL), is a global education association with more than 13,000 members and 90 affiliates in over 120 countries. TESOL is recognized as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) of the United Nations Department of Public Information. TESOL's mission is to ensure excellence in English language teaching to speakers of other languages.

TESOL values:

- individual language rights;
- professionalism in language education;
- accessible, high quality education;
- collaboration in a global community;
- interaction of research and reflective practice for educational improvement; and
- respect for diversity and multiculturalism