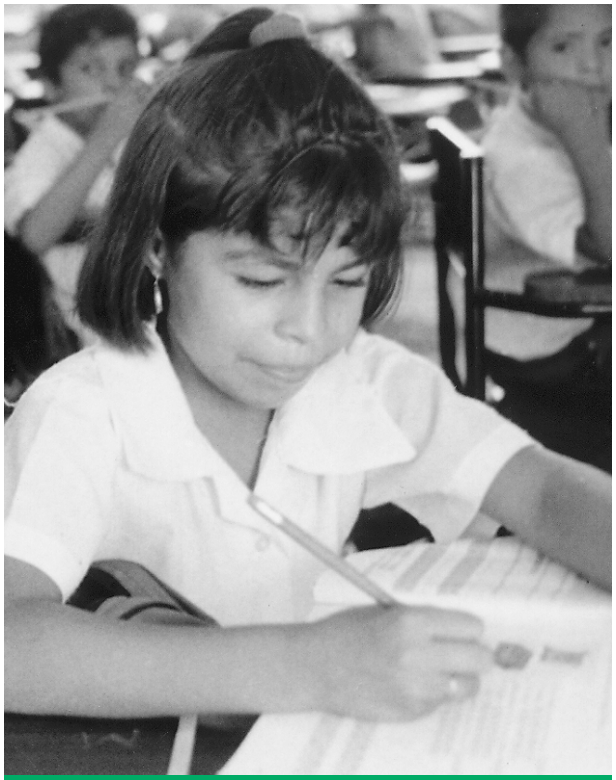
SECOND-LANGUAGE Literacy Instruction

A Position Statement of the International Reading Association



All students come to school with strengths in their home language. Ideally literacy instruction builds on those strengths. The challenge for schools occurs when students' home language is not the language of schooling.

In the United States between 1986 and 1998, the number of children with limited English ability rose from 1.6 million to 9.9 million. By the year 2050, the percentage of children in the United States who arrive at school speaking a language other than English will reach 40% (Lindholm-Leary, 2000). Many of these second-language speakers of English will also come from backgrounds of poverty, have parents with low levels of education, and attend schools in urban and rural areas that are plagued by limited resources, insufficient numbers of certified teachers, and poor physical structures.

Although the increasing numbers of children who do not speak the language of schools is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States, around the world many children arrive at school speaking home languages different from the language of schooling. In fact, worldwide, bilingual and multilingual speakers outnumber monolingual speakers (Tucker, 1999).

What is the International Reading Association's position on second-language literacy instruction?

Because of the prevalence of second-language literacy instruction, and because the consequences of not learning to read are significant, the International Reading Association takes the following position on second-language literacy instruction.

Literacy learning is easiest when schools provide initial literacy instruction in a child's home language. Such instruction is consistent with building on children's strengths and with connecting unfamiliar material to the familiar to maximize learning efficiency. Literacy skills developed in the home language can then be applied to learning to read and write in a second language, which results in students who have become literate and gained proficiency in two (or perhaps more) languages.

Proficiency in the dominant language is the goal of language and literacy instruction, and bilingualism or multilingualism is desirable. Families have the right to decide whether initial literacy instruction is delivered in the dominant language or the home language. Where such a choice is not feasible, the right of the child to choose to be bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate, or monolingual, monocultural, and monoliterate must be honored and respected.

What are some of the considerations to make when determining policy on second-language learning?

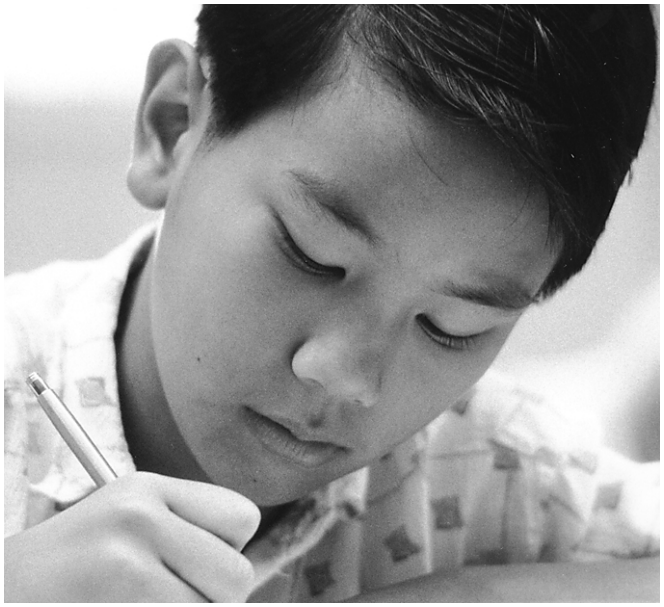
The accumulated wisdom of research in the field of bilingualism suggests that while initial literacy learning in a second language can be successful, it is riskier than starting with the child's home language—especially for those children affected by poverty, low levels of parental education, or poor schooling (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

However, providing excellent initial literacy instruction to second-language learners is more complex than these brief paragraphs suggest. There is no single or simple solution to guarantee the success of second-language readers and writers.

Families of second-language backgrounds may have differing preferences in relation to initial literacy instruction. For instance, some families may want initial literacy instruction to be delivered in the home language, while others may prefer initial literacy instruction to be delivered in the school's dominant language.

In addition, the possibilities for providing initial literacy instruction in the child's home language are dependent on local, state or provincial, and national policies that determine the language of schooling. The formulation of these policies is complex. The relative proportions of language groups in the populations, the political and economic status of the various language groups, and the history of the various language groups all influence the selection of language for initial literacy instruction. The following examples suggest some of the dimensions of the complexity.

Kenya became independent in 1963. There is not and never has been a majority language in the country. There are at least 20 indigenous languages, but since colonization by Britain, the official language has been and remains English. Before Kenya's independence, the initial stages of education were organized on home-language lines. Beyond the initial stages, the medium of instruction gradually shifted over to English. Once independent, the new government abolished the home-language policy for initial education and made English the sole medium of instruction at all levels in state schools. This was done in the name of racial integration and nation building.



The situation in England has generally been characterized by a feasibility approach. A survey in the schools of inner London in the early 1980s revealed that over 150 languages other than English were spoken as first language by at least one child (see Gorman et al., 1988, 1991, and earlier reports cited there). Most of these languages had very few speakers, and the speakers of some of those with significant numbers were too widely dispersed to make home-language provision practicable (for example, Greek and Turkish). Some areas did and do have substantial concentrations of speakers of particular languages (these tend to be South Asian languages, especially Punjabi and Bengali). Home-language provision in these circumstances would therefore introduce an element of racial segregation and could all too easily be interpreted as racist. As a result, language maintenance for all minorities is seen as the responsibility of the various communities.

In Wales, the situation is different. Though the majority of the population (over 80%) are monolingual English speakers, the Welsh language has been spoken since long before the English language existed. For this indigenous linguistic minority, there is a special provision. Welsh is an equal official language with English, and Welsh-medium education is available for all children whose parents want it, including monolingual English-speaking parents who want their children to have better chances of public-sector jobs in Wales, most of which require some command of Welsh. Welsh-medium education is available from preschool up to university level (though at the higher levels, it is not available in every subject, for practical reasons).

In both the United States and Canada, education policy is set at the state/provincial or local levels. For example, Saskatchewan Education recently conducted a needs assessment that identified the numbers and locations of all school-age English Second-Language (ESL) Speakers and English Second-Dialect (ESD) speakers. The needs assessment identified issues related to the needs of these speakers and called for the province to establish an ESL/ESD policy (Saskatchewan Education, 2000). In the United States, the role of the federal government is to provide guidance and resources, not policy and curriculum. The federal government provides only 7% of schools' funding, and the rest of the money and most decisions come from the state or local level. This means that in Canada and the United States, many policies coexist, and there is no coherent national pattern of second-language literacy instruction in either country.

The thrust of education policies in many Asian nations is toward children becoming literate in multiple languages. Hong Kong shares this notion and considers English an important second language (Ng, 1999). According to Yu (1999), "English is a compulsory subject in the primary and secondary curriculum and proficiency in English has always been a ladder to success." Thousands of young children are exposed to English language lessons in almost every Hong Kong preschool classroom. Teaching English language and literacy is approached as a curriculum subject.

What do these policy examples show us about second-language literacy instruction?

All these international examples show that the provision of home-language education varies from no provision to a complete system parallel to the mainstream; approaches can differ between countries with a majority language and those with a mosaic of linguistic groups; and social, political, and economic concerns are as important to these decisions as the question of what patterns of instruction are most effective in producing a literate citizenry.

In addition, the various language policies are associated with differences in second-language readers' performance. For example, the different situations in England and Wales provide valuable evidence on the effects of home-language versus national-language education and its interaction with socioeconomic status. A series of national surveys of the attainment of English (reading and writing) of 11- and 15-year-old children was carried out between 1979 and 1988 (Gorman et al., 1991). In all these surveys, average literacy attainment was calculated separately for first- and second-language speakers of English, and separately for England and

Wales. The results consistently showed significantly higher average scores for monolingual children over second-language children in England (where most second-language children speak a South Asian language), but no difference in Wales (where almost the only minority language is Welsh). Two main factors contributed to the difference between the two countries:

- The provision of home-language education in Welsh but not in any of the minority languages in England.
- In England, second-language communities are clustered disproportionately in lower socioeconomic levels, whereas in Wales, bilinguals are indistinguishable from the monolingual majority.

The situation in Wales, therefore, indicates that initial, indeed complete, education in a mother tongue need not result in lower achievement in the national language that is different. Linguistic and socioeconomic factors play key roles in the literacy achievement of second-language learners.

How should literacy instruction be given to second-language learners?

The United Nations has adopted the principle that indigenous linguistic minorities have the right to education in their home language. The International Reading Association supports this position and also supports the rights of families to determine the language of initial literacy instruction for their children. Families have the right, when feasible, to have their children taught to read in their home language. They also have the right to have their children's initial literacy instruction delivered in the official language of instruction of their country of residence.

As the examples here indicate, whether it is feasible to provide initial literacy instruction in a child's home language depends on many factors. It is the Association's position that the choice made by families and students must be honored, whether that choice involves initial literacy instruction in the home language or in a second language. When there are sufficient numbers of children who speak a language other than the language of instruction, schools should offer families choices for initial literacy instruction. In situations where this is not feasible—perhaps there is not a critical mass of children who speak a particular language, or such instruction could contribute to racial and ethnic segregation in public schools—a child's background and linguistic heritage must be treated with respect, and bi- or multilingualism should be promoted as a positive value.

In all situations, second-language learners must be treated respectfully and offered equal educational opportunities that honor basic general educational principles:

- Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students.
- Develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities.
- Contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of home and community.
- Challenge students toward cognitive complexity.
- Engage students through dialogue, especially the instructional conversation. (CREDE, 2000)

What are the recommendations of the International Reading Association regarding second-language literacy instruction?

The essence of the Association's position is self-determination and tolerance—tolerance of majorities for minorities; tolerance of speakers of all languages for speakers of others; and especially tolerance on the part of monolingual speakers of the world's politically dominant languages for multilingualism. Efforts to deny students access to initial literacy instruction in their home language, often launched in the supposed interest of furthering national unity, are frequently the result of intolerance. Mandating that second-language speakers receive initial reading instruction in their home language may also reflect intolerance.

To summarize, the position of the International Reading Association is that proficiency in the dominant language is the goal of language and literacy instruction; bilingualism or multilingualism is desirable; and where possible, families have the right to decide whether initial literacy instruction is delivered in the dominant language or the home language. To support this positon, we offer the following recommendations.

Recommendations to Teachers

- Pursue professional development in the area of second-language literacy.
- Become familiar with the language issues that affect students in your school. Try to gain an understanding of the range of political, social, cultural, and economic issues that maybe involved.
- Seek information and advice from parents, community members, and other teachers that will help you improve the instruction of particular students.

Recommendations to Parents

- Become informed about the educational options available, and express your preferences to policy makers and educators.
- Understand that through schooling, children may be able to develop strengths in both the official language and their home language. One does not necessarily have to be sacrificed for the other.

Recommendations to Policy Makers

- Understand that proficiency in the official language is an end that may be reached through various means, and respect the judgment of educators and parents about what these means may be in particular situations.
- Recognize the value of initial instruction in the mother tongue, which may improve student's chances for eventual high achievement in the dominant language.
- Fund cross-national research efforts in second-language literacy learning and instruction.

Recommendations to Researchers

- Pursue collaborative research agendas cross-nationally so that the effects of various language distribution patterns, as well as social, economic, political, and instructional variables on second-language literacy learning can be understood and used to inform strong policy initiatives.

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Victoria J. Risko & Karen Bromley, 2001

Kids Come in All Languages: Reading Instruction for ESL Students
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Language Instructional Issues in Asian Classrooms
Cheah Yin Mee & Ng Seok Moi, Editors, 1999

Literacy Instruction for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: A Collection of Articles and Commentaries
Michael F. Opitz, Editor, 1998

Journal Articles

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