



BILINGUAL OR NOT: HOW LANGUAGE POLICY IMPACTS CLASSROOM ACHIEVEMENT

What is the best way to teach the increasing number of students for whom English is not their native language?

This question has become a politicized issue and the subject of heated debate in recent years. It's also at the heart of the immersion and bilingual education research being conducted by Dr. Francesca Lopez, assistant professor of educational policy and leadership.

"Math and science achievement among new immigrants, particularly those struggling to learn the dominant language, is an issue of considerable importance in the U.S.," Lopez says.

Lopez's findings show that in states with the highest concentration of Hispanic students, a stronger bilingual education emphasis meant significantly better fourth-grade reading achievement scores among Hispanic English language learners and Hispanic non-ELLs. Now she's expanding her study to look at math and science results, as well.

"Anti-language policies can be seen as anti-culture messages," Lopez says. "And when you target a population and say, 'You can't use your language and heritage in school,' they did worse."

However, there is no uniform approach for teaching ELL students. Some states, such as Arizona, California and Massachusetts, don't allow any languages other than English to be used in the classroom. Other states, like New Mexico, Texas and Wisconsin, require bilingual education, which incorporates instruction in students' native language as students acquire English. Still others allow both English immersion and bilingual education, lacking any mandate.

As a result, Lopez concludes that educational policies that vary widely between states have very different — and lasting — effects on this growing student population.

"Ultimately, I want to make the public aware that forcing assimilation by attempting to eliminate students' cultural heritage will only widen disparities," she says. — TC