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# In the Arid Zone: Drying Out Educational Resources for English Language Learners Through Policy and Practice

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## Abstract

This article presents a variety of issues related to the effects of restrictive language and educational policies that ultimately limits important resources for English language learners (i.e., services, funding, time, and information). The authors spotlight the state of Arizona as an unfortunate case of language control through policies, which has the promise of being replicated in other areas of the United States. As these forms of control make their way into everyday classroom life, English language learners are further stripped from essential educational opportunities when denied the right to draw on their own social, cultural, and linguistic resources for learning.

## Keywords

Hispanic education, social, language, identity, minority academic success

## Introduction

The rapid demographic shift occurring in the United States, mostly due to immigration, has produced a fundamentally new and diverse social context

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of education, particularly in urban schools throughout the United States. Children previously considered “minority” students are now the numerical majority in all major city schools in the country (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010).

In this article, we address the education of one important and growing subgroup of students in urban settings, those who have been designated as English language learners (ELLs). Institutionally, this label is intended for students, regardless of age, ethnicity, or social history, who have been identified either by language testing or survey, or by teacher observation or administrative fiat, as not being sufficiently fluent in English to participate fully in courses in that language.<sup>1</sup>

ELLs are now the fastest growing group of students in the country. It is noteworthy that 65% of all ELL students are U.S. born (Capps et al., 2005). As such, these are primarily American children and youth whose education we are discussing in this article.

The majority of ELL students are concentrated in six states: Arizona, California, New York, Florida, Massachusetts, and Illinois. However, they also represent a growing presence in other settings, such as in Nevada and in southern states, which have had a marked increase of immigrant populations. In what follows, we offer an examination of the role of research and policy on the educational experiences of ELLs. To do so, we focus on the case of Arizona as a way of forestalling the adoption by other states of similar restrictive English-only language policies and aversive actions against immigrant and citizen English language learners alike. We then present educational practices that research has shown to provide specific affordances for ELLs but are by and large absent from the educational experiences of these students enrolled in U.S. schools. To conclude, we discuss the ways by which narrow language policies and the absence of equitable educational practices for linguistically diverse students serve to maintain power structures that sustain the status quo.

## **The Case of Arizona**

The origin of Arizona State ELL policy is complicated. It is the result of a unique nexus between state and federal legislation, federal case law, and state-level ideological beliefs about education, language acquisition, and immigration. For more than a decade, this nexus has determined, confounded, and limited the educational choices available to ELLs and their families. We have published extended discussions of the history of Arizona ELL education policies elsewhere (see Combs, 2012; Combs, Evans, Fletcher, Parra, &

Jiménez, 2005; Combs, Gonzalez, & Moll, 2011). For the purpose of this article, we will summarize the most salient policy decisions that have had serious implications on the education of ELLs as they control four major forms of resource allocation: services, funding, time, and information.

## Services

In November 2000, Arizona voters approved Proposition 203, a ballot initiative that replaced bilingual education and English as a second language programs with a relatively untested program called Structured English Immersion (SEI). In an SEI classroom, teachers are expected to teach in English only though they can adjust their instruction using “sheltered” strategies to make it more comprehensible. What this means is that ELLs are required to learn content areas in and through a language they have not yet acquired. The dominant assumption guiding such actions is that “monolingual Anglo members of the general public are perfectly capable of deciding what kind of educational programming is best for non-Anglo language minority children . . . and are better able to make such decisions than are bilingual education teachers or the communities the children come from” (Sleeter, 2001, pp. xv-xvi).

The text of Proposition 203 expressed three folk theories<sup>2</sup> of second-language acquisition: first, that young children learn English better than older students; second, that immersion in English only would help students acquire the language more rapidly; and third, that the SEI model would teach them English in 1 year.<sup>3</sup> These assumptions may have sounded commonsensical to voters at the time, but there was little support for them in the applied linguistics and second-language acquisition research literature at the time (Collier, 1987, 1988, 1995; Crawford, 1997, 1999; Cummins, 1991, 1992; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Gándara et al., 2000; Greene, 1998; Krashen, 1996, 1999; Ramírez, Yuen, & Ramey, 1991; Willig, 1985; Wong Fillmore, 1991a, 1991b). Although the concerns of some of this literature was profiled in the state’s largest newspapers (Corella, 2000; Fischer, 2000a, 2000b; Gonzalez, 2000; Portillo, 2000; Stauffer, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1996, 2002), voters seemed unpersuaded by claims that bilingual education was a more effective means of teaching both English and content areas to second-language learners. The measure passed with 63% of the vote. Shortly thereafter, state education officials began intense efforts to rid school districts of programs that used students’ first languages a means of instruction.

Before passage of Proposition 203, state school districts had implemented a variety of programs for ELLs and indigenous students, including bilingual

education and English as a second language models (transitional, maintenance-developmental, dual language, two-way immersion, content ESL, pull-out ESL, sheltered content instruction). Parents had the freedom to select a particular model for their children, and if the neighborhood school did not provide it, they generally had the option to enroll children in one that did. Several of the bilingual programs were exemplary and nationally known (Combs et al., 2005; Holm, 1996; Holm & Holm, 1990; McCarty & Bia, 2002; Roessel & Navaho Curriculum Center, 1977; Smith, 2001; Smith & Arnot-Hopffer, 1998; Smith et al., 2002). In contrast, at the present time, the Arizona Department of Education mandates a rigid “one-size-fits-all” model into which all districts must place students who are learning English as a second language in English-only schools where they receive pull-out SEI services. Eligibility for SEI is determined by how students score on the state’s proficiency test—the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment, or AZELLA.

### Funding

Although the ideological proclivities of state policy makers and elected officials clearly influence policies guiding the education of English learners (Horne, 2004a, 2004b; Johnson, 2005), school funding for English language programs has primarily driven language and education policies in Arizona. That is, concerns about who appropriates state funding, which students are eligible (and how they are eligible because eligibility requirements have been inconsistent) and which districts receive funding (and how much they receive) tend to dominate in discussions about ELL policies. Funding controversies derive from one source—*Flores v. Arizona* (1999)—a class action filed in 1992 by parents of English learners in Nogales, Arizona. In civil rights litigation, a class comprises individuals “similarly situated,” that is, people who are similarly affected by a particular policy, law, or practice (Alexander & Alexander, 1985; Combs, 2012). The class in *Flores v. Arizona* included all ELLs in each of the state’s 15 counties.

Plaintiffs argued that the state legislature had violated the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1964) by failing to take “appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede[d] equal participation by its students in its instructional programs” arbitrarily establishing and capping the amount of additional per pupil funding appropriated to school districts serving large numbers of English language learners. The state legislature was ordered to increase its appropriation—a paltry US\$150 per English language learner—to an unspecified higher amount. Legislators ignored this ruling, however, landing them back in court. When they eventually raised the amount to US\$340, the district court judge once again declared the figure “arbitrary and capricious.”

State legislators argued they would be unable to increase the funding until a cost study determined exactly how much it would cost to educate each English learner. A state survey of school district costs of ELL programs subsequently was undertaken, with reported expenditures ranging from US\$670 to US\$2,571. While the figures were widely divergent, all participating school districts indicated they spent well more than the US\$340 appropriated by the legislature (Arizona Senate Research Staff, 2008; Hogan, n.d.).

State legislators resisted judicial funding mandates for another 5 years and not solely because of financial concerns. Some of them openly expressed doubts about the citizenship status of English learners in Arizona schools. The speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives for example declared that additional school funding for English learners would turn Arizona into “Mexico’s best school district north of the border” (Hogan, n.d.). Other legislators rejected any state responsibility for educating noncitizens and insisted that children born in the United States to undocumented parents were not citizens despite the U.S. Constitution’s explicit language to the contrary. In fact, although the numbers are hard to pin down, in Arizona the percentage of U.S.-born ELLs has been estimated at approximately 80% (Capps et al., 2005; Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). This makes them citizens of the United States. Nonetheless, among members of the state legislature, there is a widespread belief that Arizona’s ELLs are undocumented and, as such, deserve no support.

## Time

After 5 years of noncompliance with the original decision in the *Flores v Arizona* case, the district court, increasingly frustrated by the legislature’s recalcitrance, imposed massive fines against the state. In a strongly worded order for sanctions, the judge expressed his frustration:

The Court can only imagine how many students have started school since Judge Marquez entered the Order in February 2000, declaring these programs were inadequately funded in an arbitrary and capricious manner that violates ELL students’ rights under the EEOA. How many students may have stopped school, by dropping out or failing because of foot-dragging by the State and failure to comply with the original Order and compliance directives such as the Order issued on January 28, 2005? Plaintiffs are no longer inclined to depend on the good faith of the Defendants or to have faith that without some extraordinary pressure, the State will ever comply with the mandates of the respective Orders issued by this Court. (*Flores v. Arizona*, 2005, p. 3)

**Table 1.** Arizona ELLs Task Force Structured English Immersion Models

AZELLA		
Preemergent & emergent	Basic level	Intermediate level
For the elementary grades (K-5)		
45 min—Oral English	30 min—Oral English	15 min—Oral English
60 min—Grammar	60 min—Grammar	60 min—Grammar
60 min—Reading	60 min—Reading	60 min—Reading
60 min—Vocabulary	60 min—Vocabulary	60 min—Vocabulary
15 min—Prewriting	30 min—Writing	45 min—Writing
Secondary grades (6-12)		
60 min—Conversational English and academic vocabulary	60 min—Conversational English and academic vocabulary	2 hr—Language arts
60 min—English reading	60 min—English reading	60 min—Academic English reading
60 min—English writing	60 min—English writing	60 min—Academic writing and grammar
60 min—English grammar	60 min—English grammar	

Note: AZELLA = Arizona English Language Learners Assessment.

The legislature scrambled to pass *something*. The result was HB 2064, which minimally increased ELL program funding but also reconceptualized SEI as a segregated 4-hr English grammar and reading “model.” The new “English Language Development” block requires a minimum of 4 hr per day of English language development (ELD) and limits a student’s participation in the program to a period “not normally intended to exceed one year.” The ELD block focuses on phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and semantics. With the typical school day comprising 6 to 6.5 hr per day, 4 hr of English grammar instruction is a significant portion (Combs, 2012). State education officials have even stipulated the number of minutes allocated to each domain (see Table 1). The learners’ English proficiency levels, as measured by the Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA) instrument, determine the amount of time they receive oral English development and writing instruction.

In view of the table above, it is noteworthy that most of the instruction provided during the times stipulated for ELD is void of content—that is,

they entail large chunks of time devoted to highly decontextualized language drills. This kind of time allocation for the school day of ELLs has had profound impact on what children can learn, on who they are able to interact with, and ultimately on the kinds of identities they can craft for themselves as students through the course of their academic histories (see DaSilva Iddings & Katz, 2007).

### *Information*

Today, more than 10 years later, bilingual programs in Arizona are almost nonexistent or simply limping along. With few exceptions, these programs have been replaced with this hybridized version of SEI in which instruction is exclusively in English and content subjects like science, social studies, and language arts are not taught. Indeed, the phrase “bilingual education” is markedly absent in state-level discourse about the education of ELLs in Arizona; that is, current policy discussions about educational models for these students focus solely on the *English-only* models available as if there were no (or had never been) other alternatives.

Proposition 203 has been codified into law and is now part of the Arizona Revised Statutes (Title 15, Article 3.1 §751-757). Arizona Department of Education officials repeat these declarations and other sections of the law with great authority, as if they were established truths. For example, the State Office of English Language Acquisition Services (OELAS) has a website that provides administrative forms, announcements, links to policy and legal documents, and training materials. School districts can access these materials as they wish. One of the documents available is a 107-slide PowerPoint presentation called “Nuts and Bolts,” which OELAS staff members have used in periodic seminars throughout the state.<sup>4</sup> Only two slides reference research in any form: The first states that the mandatory ELD models were developed from “critical research based components,” although these components are not identified (Combs, 2012). The second lists four broad principles justifying the ELD models, again without attribution:

1. English is fundamental to content area mastery;
2. Language ability based grouping facilitates rapid language learning;
3. Time on task increases academic learning; and
4. A discrete language skills approach facilitates English language learning.

Another slide, titled “One Year to Proficiency,” advances the idea that students can become fluent in English in 1 year through prescriptive means:



amount of content instruction students receive relative to English grammar and reading, and concerns about increasing school segregation in Arizona (see <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu>).

Contrary to widely touted benefits of the ELD block by state education officials, study results paint a dismal picture of ELL education in Arizona's schools. One study found that after a full year of implementation, achievement gaps between ELLs and English speakers have not closed (Garcia, Lawton, & de Figueiredo, 2010a). Another study concluded that English learners are not acquiring enough English in 1 year to be reclassified and, hence, must remain in the blocks a 2nd or 3rd year (Lillie et al., 2010).

Several studies raised serious concerns about the increasing segregation in Arizona school classrooms, comparing the blocks to the infamous "Mexican Rooms" of earlier years. These studies also indicated that students are not receiving the content knowledge (in science, language arts, social studies, and so forth) they will need to be successful academically or to pass state standardized tests (Gándara & Orfield, 2010; Martinez-Wenzl, Pérez, & Gándara, 2010; Ríos-Aguilar, González-Canche, & Moll, 2010a). Two studies questioned the validity of the AZELLA, Arizona's ELL assessment instrument<sup>5</sup> (Florez, 2010; Garcia, Lawton, & de Figueiredo, 2010b), and one found that state changes to the Home Language Survey (from three questions to one) significantly—and intentionally—reduced the numbers of ELLs identified as legally entitled to additional state education services. Finally, Lillie et al. (2010) found that at the secondary level, high school students consigned to the ELD blocks were unable to take and pass courses required for graduation or to go on to college. In their totality, these studies "raise grave concerns that secondary ELLs are being set up to drop out of school, while elementary age students are being stigmatized and marginalized in their schools" (<http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu>).

## **Policies Into Practices: Further Limiting Resources for ELLs**

The ideological traps of Arizona policies not only ensnare students into low-quality education but also constrain possibilities of a more favorable and expansive pedagogy. This is a national trend as well. The central feature of this trap is that it ultimately *curtails what counts as resources for learning*, preventing teachers and students from building on the ample linguistic and cultural affordances in their educational environments. These affordances include, first-language development; second-language speakers, readers, and writers as models; academic emphasis in the curriculum; family funds of

knowledge; adequate forms of assessment; and meaningful pedagogy. In the next paragraphs, we will explain the properties of these affordances and the importance of recapturing them in school practices in Arizona as well as in other areas of the United States.

### *First-Language Development*

Research in the area of second-language acquisition has shown the importance of understanding language not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for thinking (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). English-only policies deprive students from the advantages of educational approaches that provide them with the opportunity to maintain and to continue developing their first language. These advantages have been well documented by research and include, for example, the use of multiple linguistic competences specific to bilinguals (e.g., their greater metalinguistic awareness) and opportunities for students to employ strategic actions (e.g., language brokering) to create meaning and to elaborate on the content of instruction (DaSilva Iddings, Risko, & Rampulla, 2009; DaSilva Iddings & Rose, 2012; Martinez-Roldán, Yeager, & Tuyay, 2005).

### *Second-Language Speakers, Readers, and Writers as Models*

Arizona policy of grouping ELL students for instruction for 4 hr a day effectively segregates these students from English-language models. As Wong Fillmore and Snow (2000) have written, ELLs must “interact directly and frequently with people who know the language well enough to reveal how it works and how it can be used” (p. 24) so they can receive feedback and negotiate meaning in the L2. A vital resource for English-language learning, then, is to establish relations with native English speakers. Isolating students from such peer networks and language models serves to constrain rather than enhance their language development, thus also hindering their academic progress.

### *Family Funds of Knowledge*

When the schooling of ELLs is devoted to English-only instruction, with its assimilative intent, there is also the real possibility of rupturing or fracturing students’ connection to their families and to their lived experiences and funds of knowledge, potentially important resources for learning (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Rumbaut and Portes (2001), in their longitudinal analysis of second-generation students, found that a critical element among

the most successful students, in combination with the guidance of alert parents and significant others, such as a caring teacher who would direct the student in her or his academic pursuits, was the ability to build on what we would call household funds of knowledge in overcoming barriers to advancement or mobility. Therefore, educational policies directed at a forced transition to English monolingualism, instead of, whenever possible, the cultivation of fluent bilingualism, are seriously misguided. They deprive students of valuable resources to maintain critical intergenerational alliances, rupturing family relations as they adapt to a new society, and access to the knowledge and practices to succeed socially and academically early in their schooling. As Portes and Hao (2002) suggested, it is the possibility of learning English

while preserving the cultural anchor in the family's own past that lead to the most desirable results. Cut the moorings and children are cast adrift in a uniform monolingual world. They, their families, and eventually the communities where they settle will pay the price. (p. 22)

### *Academic Emphasis*

The academic achievement of ELLs in the U.S. schools (and in Arizona) reflects the repercussions of a long-lived history of educational inequity for students. Some of this history continues to be perpetuated through low teacher expectations of, and/or unfavorable bias toward, lower-income students and racial/ethnic minorities (DaSilva Iddings & Katz, 2007). Also, studies have shown that access to rigorous curriculum and overall high-quality education has been almost exclusively reserved for White, middle-class students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). DeCuir and Dixon (2004) contended that current tracking systems, honors classes, and gifted education—widely populated by Whites—contribute to the resegregation of schools. In addition, many recent studies have suggested that the preservation of English as the hegemonic language of school has implications for students' for the academic achievement of ELLs and ultimately relegates these students to subordinate positions in the classroom (DaSilva Iddings & Jang, 2008).

### *Adequate Forms of Assessment*

ELLs enrolled in U.S. schools continue to be disadvantaged by standards-based educational reforms. The Board on Testing and Assessment Report (Hakuta & Beatty, 2000) revealed that using standardized tests to assess students whose language skills are likely to significantly affect their test

performance yields inaccurate results. In addition, the standardized approach to testing is considered inadequate for ELLs as it is largely driven by policies rather than theories related to second-language acquisition (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003; DaSilva Iddings & Rose, 2012). That is, these tests have traditionally been normed for monolingual speakers and do not capture the advantages of multilingualism.

It follows that the standardized tests currently in use in our public schools may lack validity for ELLs; thus, the academic abilities of these students continue to be underestimated. Indeed researchers have shown that these students are grossly overrepresented in low academic tracks and that the school dropout rates for these students (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005; DaSilva Iddings & Jang, 2008). In view of these challenges, there clearly is an urgent need to create assessment instruments that are sensitive to social, cultural, and linguistic differences. In addition, there is a need to create a process-oriented diagnostic tool (i.e., dynamic assessment) that provides information about ELLs' distinctive psychological processes that may not be derivable from other sources (Poehner, 2008).

### *Meaningful Pedagogies*

Pedagogic practices have frequently been subject to social, cultural, and political influence and, as such, have often adopted social patterns and political lines in accordance with the dominant social class that has guided its interests. As linguistically diverse students and their respective families are not often represented in this dominant social class in U.S. schools, their interests and needs are not always considered. In addition, the current exaggerated focus on standardized test scores in American public schools can sometimes place unreasonable demands on teachers and can actually preclude the very kinds of classroom interactions and/or contextual conditions that are most desirable for promoting learning and development. Educators in general have pointed to the importance of providing students with opportunities for meaningful learning to take place; however, in relation to ELLs who are often subjected to spending the majority of their school days performing language drills, such opportunities are not always available.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, we have attempted to capture the educational landscape surrounding ELLs. In so doing, we presented a summary of issues related to the effects of restrictive language and educational policies that ultimately dispossess these students of valuable resources.

The schooling of ELLs, the fastest growing student group in the country, has become a major challenge in all urban school districts and in other regions of the country as well. We have opted to spotlight the education of these students in the state of Arizona, which is evidently far from being representative of an ideal model but nevertheless has promise to be replicated in other parts of the country.

The most prominent characteristic of the Arizona model is the control and restriction through policies and practices of essential institutional resources (i.e., services, funding, time, and information). As these forms of control make their way into everyday classroom life, ELLs are further stripped from educational possibilities as they are often denied the right to draw on their own social, cultural, and linguistic resources for learning and are thus left educationally stranded. Examples of these practices include separating students for 4-hr a day for English lessons using only English as the medium of instruction. This restrictive arrangement, and the reductive and prescriptive emphases on the teaching of English summarized above, has resulted in an educational desert of sorts where ELLs are confronted with overcoming several serious pedagogical limitations with only partial or no access to ample resources for learning available in the school and broader community.

Of the issues we have enumerated, three seem the most salient for teachers, according to recent survey results (e.g., Ríos-Aguilar, González-Canche, & Moll, 2010b): (a) the lack of emphasis on first-language development, which represents a formidable asset for second-language development; (b) the segregation of students from native English speakers, thus missing valuable interactive opportunities for the development of fluency in English; and (c) the lack of academic emphasis in the program. We suggest that any attempt at improving the education of ELL students must, at the very least, address these limitations in systematic and persistent ways.

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### **Notes**

1. The authors of this article believe that the label *English Language Learner* conveys a subtractive view of children (see also García, 2009; García & Kleifgen,

2010; Reyes, 2006). Instead, we favor the label *emergent bilinguals* to describe children who speak languages other than English, who are in a “dynamic process of developing bilingual and biliterate competencies” (Reyes, 2006, p. 268, emphasis in original), and possess unique linguistic, cognitive, and social resources (García, 2009). We agree with our colleagues about the more positive message conveyed by “emergent bilinguals” and acknowledge that our use of English language learner over other labels represents an ideological conflict. For us, how to describe students in Arizona schools is a rhetorical dilemma. On one hand, ELL suggests students who are acquiring English (and only English). On the other hand, describing students as emergent bilinguals acknowledges the hopeful possibility of future bilingualism, an outcome we all desire. In this article, we have retained the term English language learner, primarily because in Arizona, ELL political and pedagogical policies intentionally preclude the development of bilingualism.

2. A folk theory can be defined as a model that makes up a shared common sense; see [www.wku.edu/~jan.garrett/401s07/glosspif.htm](http://www.wku.edu/~jan.garrett/401s07/glosspif.htm)
3. From the Findings and Declarations of Proposition 203: “Young immigrant children can easily acquire full fluency in a new language, such as English, if they are heavily exposed to that language in the classroom at an early age.” Now officially part of Arizona Revised Statutes, Title 15, Section 752: English Language Education: “Children who are English learners shall be educated through sheltered English immersion during a temporary transition period not normally intended to exceed one year” (Arizona Revised Statutes, Title 15, Section 752: English Language Education).
4. Available from the website of the Arizona Department of Education, <http://www.ade.state.az.us/oelas>
5. Arizona English Language Learners Assessment (AZELLA).

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