

Bilingual education and the cycle of native language

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



The original objective of bilingual education was to ensure students would not fall behind academically because of a poor command of English and to gradually teach them English as a second language. If language-minority students were taught some subjects in their native tongue, proponents insisted, they potentially could learn English without sacrificing content knowledge.

But bilingual education's critics argue that the approach keeps students in a cycle of native language dependency that ultimately inhibits significant progress in English language acquisition. Proponents counter that if students first learn to read in the language they are fluent in and then transfer the skills over to English-their second language-they will develop stronger literacy skills in the long term. Plus, they argue that in an increasingly global society, schools, far from discouraging native-language retention, should work to help students maintain their native tongues, even as they also teach them English.

Complicating the debate is the range of programs that, by some people's definition, fall under the umbrella of bilingual education. Some use bilingual education to refer only to transitional bilingual education or two-way bilingual programs while others consider any program designed for students with limited proficiency in English to be "bilingual." For instance, they may refer to English-as-a-second-language programs, where students are typically taught solely in English, as bilingual education.

Public sentiment against transitional bilingual education has been growing. On June 2, 1998, California voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 227,

an initiative that largely eliminated bilingual education from the state" s public schools. Under the California initiative, most LEP students in that state are now placed in English-immersion programs.

Arizona voters followed suit by passing Proposition 203, a measure similar to the California initiative, on Nov. 7, 2000. While the California initiative reduced the percentage of LEP children in bilingual education from 29 percent to 12 percent, the Arizona initiative is expected to end bilingual education because, unlike the California initiative, it makes it very difficult for parents to seek waivers from English immersion that would permit some bilingual education to continue. Arizona officials expect to implement the law by fall 2001.

Despite the " English only" message that Propositions 227 and 203 bear, the debate over how best to instruct linguistically diverse students is far from decided nationwide.