

Bilingual education has spillover effect

September 10 2013



Bilingual education programs have a large spillover effect on the students they're not designed for, according to a study co-authored by Michigan State University scholar Scott Imberman. Credit: Michigan State University

Bilingual education programs have a substantial spillover effect on the students they're not designed for, according to a groundbreaking study co-authored by a Michigan State University scholar.

Texas [elementary students](#) who speak English as their home language and were enrolled in schools with [bilingual education](#) programs

performed much better on state math and reading tests than native English-speaking [students](#) at schools without bilingual education programs.

The study did not explore the reasons why, but it could be because the English-speaking students received more [direct instruction](#) while the Spanish-speaking students were receiving bilingual education in a separate setting.

While much research has examined the effects of bilingual education on Spanish-speaking students, this study is one of the first to investigate the spillover effects. The findings appear in the *Journal of Public Economics*.

"What this says is that simply focusing on how these programs affect the students who use them is missing a large part of the picture," said Scott Imberman, study co-author and MSU associate professor of economics and education. "Whenever you create education programs you have to think beyond the people they're targeted to, and think about the other students as well."

Federal law requires [school districts](#) to provide special assistance to students with limited English proficiency, or LEP. To meet that requirement, districts typically offer one of two programs:

- English as a Second Language, which typically involves pulling the LEP students out of the mainstream classroom for only certain periods for instruction in their [native language](#)
- Or bilingual education, in which the LEP students generally are taught in a separate classroom for the entire day.

Educating the growing number of LEP students is one of the major challenges facing U.S. educators and policymakers today. About 1 in 9 students enrolled in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 were classified as LEP

in 2008-09 – a marked increase from the ratio of 1 in 13 recorded a decade earlier.

In Texas, districts with 20 or more students in the same grade who have the same home language are required to offer those students bilingual education.

The researchers compared Texas elementary schools just below and just above the 20-student cutoff. They found that scores on standardized math and reading tests for native English speakers were significantly higher at schools with the bilingual education programs.

LEP students in schools with the bilingual education programs also scored higher on the tests, although there weren't enough students in the sample for the finding to be conclusive.

Overall, Imberman said, the findings bode well for proponents of bilingual education.

"As far as the question of whether bilingual education or ESL is better, this study provides some evidence suggesting that bilingual education is more helpful than ESL," he said.

Imberman's fellow researchers are Aimee Chin of the University of Houston and N. Meltem Daysal of the University of Southern Denmark.

Imberman has a joint appointment in MSU's Department of Economics in the College of Social Science and the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Special Education in the College of Education.

Provided by Michigan State University

Citation: Bilingual education has spillover effect (2013, September 10) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-09-bilingual-spillover-effect.html>

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