

**Factors Affecting the Performance of the Bilingual Students: Analysis  
and Recommendations**

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**Winter, 2010**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As the school districts are becoming more accountable for the performance of their students, AYP is viewed as the ultimate goal. One of the factors negatively impacting the AYP is the poor academic performance for the bilingual students. This is a particular area of concern for district with a large population of bilingual students. On the other hand, it is interesting to notice that districts are sizing down the bilingual programs to overcome state cuts of the financial support. Some districts seek the free support of Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency (Wayne RESA) for Bilingual/ESL program. As a bilingual facilitator at Wayne RESA, my action research will focus on the data collection, analysis and synthesis of an action plan to further improve the support for the enrolled students. Learning recommendations will be discussed for individual or group of students. The gained information may shade the light on some area of concern in teaching the English language for bilingual as well as all students.

## **Introduction;**

For some districts with large population of English Language Learners, the poor academic performance considered to be a serious concern due to the fact that this will negatively impact the score of the whole school and ultimately and AYP. These students have poor academic performance and limited communication skills. The teachers and administrators relay this to limited English Proficiency. Furthermore, many districts are currently facing serious financial problems with large cuts in the budgets. This cut has been correlated with reduction of the number of the English language Learner teachers or paraprofessionals. Why did the districts choose to reduce those activities? Have those positions proved to be ineffective in improving the learning of the bilingual students? Are there less costly supports that are effective?

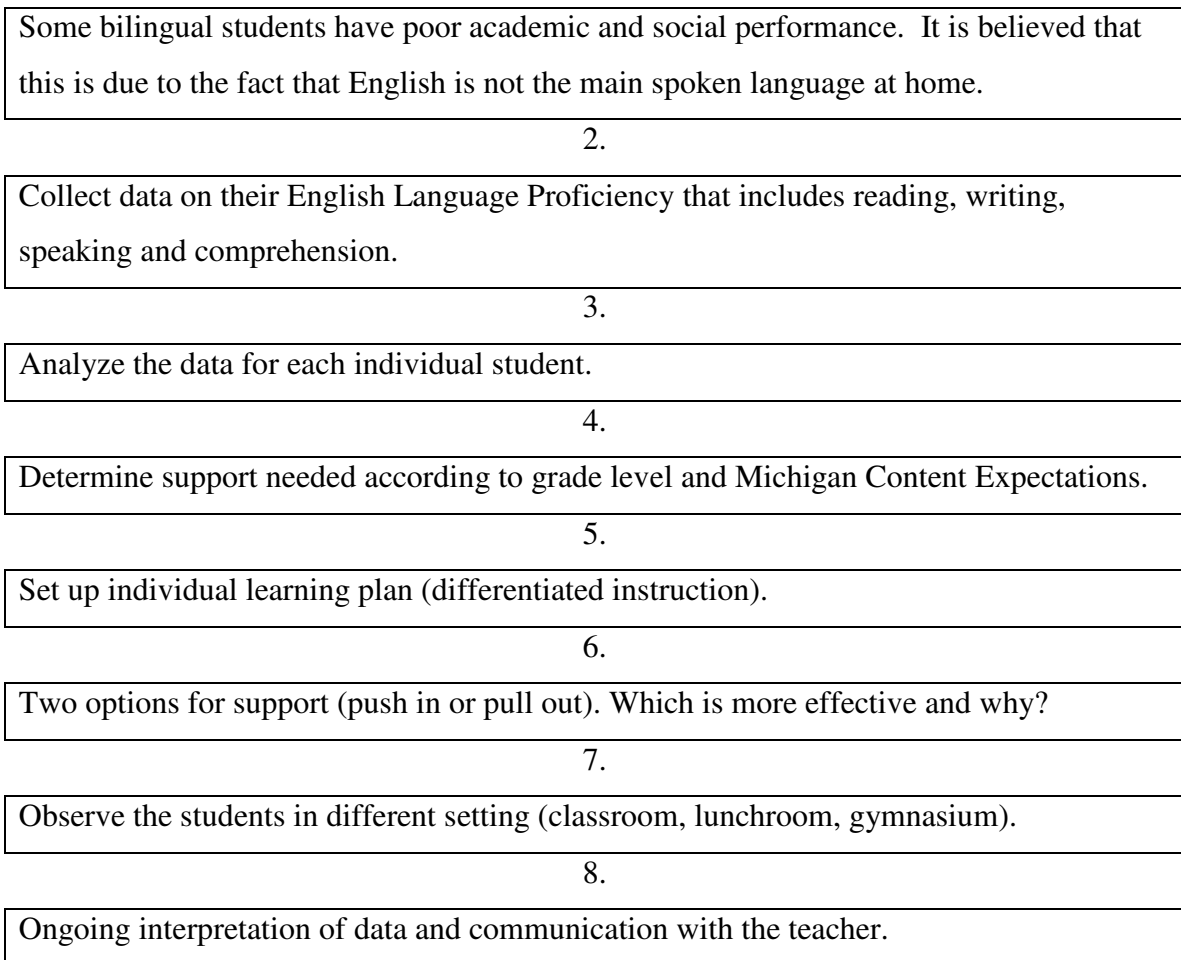
Wayne RESA has some requirement for eligibility which includes that the student's home spoken language is a one other than English; second, the low academic performance of the student; and third, a low score in English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) screening test that the student has to take. The screening test is a measure of the English reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension proficiencies. It is provided by the state of Michigan and graded according to specific criteria. The grade can be Basic, low Intermediate, Intermediate, High Intermediate, Proficient and High Proficient. To be eligible for Wayne RESA support, the student English Proficiency Score has score between Basic and Proficient. It is worth pointing out that the later mentioned criteria are solely related to English and do not take into consideration the cultural, social, personal issues in the student life. Once the student determined to be eligible, a bilingual teacher is forwarded to the school to work in close contact with the student and the teacher.

Action research involves teacher researchers in a four-step process that includes the following: identifying an area of focus, data collection, data analysis and interpretation and action planning. The action research process drew its structure from scientific research. Scientific research is an ongoing process where the results of each cycle if published with the potential of opening avenues for other discoveries in the field. The

problem is stated, investigated and data is collected. Analysis of data leads to several results and interpretation develops theorization. Verification is the last step with may take different forms (Holly & al (2009) Mills. G. E. (2003), Sagor, R (1992).

The traditional report may not fit my purpose because of the literature review part of it and, also, because it requires studies over a prolonged period of time. Therefore, my action research paper is taking the format of issues-oriented narrative report (gathering of data). It includes developing the art of observation and data collection; capturing rich, detailed information. After which, my findings should provide analysis and synthesis of observations and data. Communication with others will be discussed too. A graphic representation of the research is depicted in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Graphic Organizer**



9.

Analysis of the Results, and synthesis to make sense of the data.

10.

Are there other factors involved such as personal, cultural, or social?

11.

Further analysis and synthesis.

12.

Further plan for support in subjects other than English.

13.

Gathering of data and writing down style.

14.

Issue oriented narrative support.

15.

Process of communication with others.

### **Area of Focus Statement;**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the performance of the bilingual students in the different language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening and comprehending), followed by action plan and recommendations. This area of focus statement satisfies the purpose of my action research in that it involves teaching and learning, is something that is within my locus of control, is something I feel passionate about, and is something I would like to change or improve (Mills, 2000).

### **Research Questions;**

1- What are the language's skills needed to improve the language proficiency for each student?

2- Will the English Language Learners (ELL) improve better if they are separately grouped with a bilingual teacher, or kept with the main stream students?

## **Literature Review;**

There is a debate over the best practices for English Language Learners. Studies proved negative academic outcomes of English Language Learners who are given instructions in separate classrooms. Some rely on this to the limited proficiency in English (Lam, 1993). Others claim that this is due to an inferior education in English Learning classes (Callahan, 2005). A study conducted at the Tomas Rivera Policy demonstrated significant value of English Language Learners transitioning into mainstream English classrooms, and emphasizing the need for action. The data showed that reclassification into the mainstream English is associated with improved academic outcomes, even if it happens as late as the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Additionally, the students who are not reclassified by 8<sup>th</sup> grade have been in the district since at least first grade. The findings of the current studies emphasize on the importance of providing more resources to improve the language proficiency of English Language Learners in the elementary and middle school, in order to improve academic outcomes (Flores, Harlow-Nash, Pachon, 2009).

Writing requires many language skills which include mainly grammar and vocabularies. There is also a debate concerning teaching traditional grammar in order to equip the students with the writing skills that require Standard English usage. Our adults need to know grammar- the parts of speech, verb conjugation, the various types of phrases and clauses, the rules of usage. Others emphasize on the importance of addressing grammar in the context of writing (Weaver, 1979, 1996, 1998). Studies are still conducted and National Council of Teachers of English is always encouraging experts into these conversations (Sipe, 2006)

Michigan's English Language Arts Grade Level Content Expectations in writing are categorized into seven domains: Writing Genre (GN), Writing Process (PR), Spelling (SP), Writing Attitude (AT), Grammar and Usage (GR), Personal Style (PS), and Handwriting (HW). Looking in depth at each of the seven domains, one can conclude that the expectations include a nice variety of inquiries in learning the language. Modern ideas are present such as formulate a research question using multiple resources. Comparing and contrasting is present as well as recognize how to access personal writing

of others with teacher supervision. The expectations for grammar and its usage are explained in details starting with grade 1. Cursive writing is to be introduced starting at grade 2.

### **Student's Eligibility for Wayne RESA bilingual/ESL program**

A child must meet ONE of the following conditions to be considered an English Language Learner:

- 1- Born in a non-English speaking country outside of the United States
- 2- Have a native language other than English as most relied upon for communication;
- 3- Come from a home in which a language other than English is most relied upon for communication;
- 4- Be a Native American or Alaskan Native who comes from an environment in which a language other than
- 5- English has had a significant impact on the child's level of English language proficiency.
- 6- Secondly, the child must have sufficient difficulty understanding, speaking, reading or writing the English language.

The eligible students are those in grades K through 12 whose home language is other than English. In districts that operate preschools, children may also be eligible. Eligible students from any of the participating Wayne County school districts are referred by the local district representative to the Wayne County RESA bilingual/ESL office. Staff will assign an instructional staff person to assess the student's needs and provide needed assistance.

When the student achieves a score of proficient or better on the state's English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) in broad English ability and the student is functioning adequately in an English language environment, the student may be exited from the program. Parents may request in writing that services be discontinued.



## Setting;

My action research took the place in Westwood School district in Dearborn Heights. I service the students at all grade levels (K-12) in all schools of the district of Westwood.

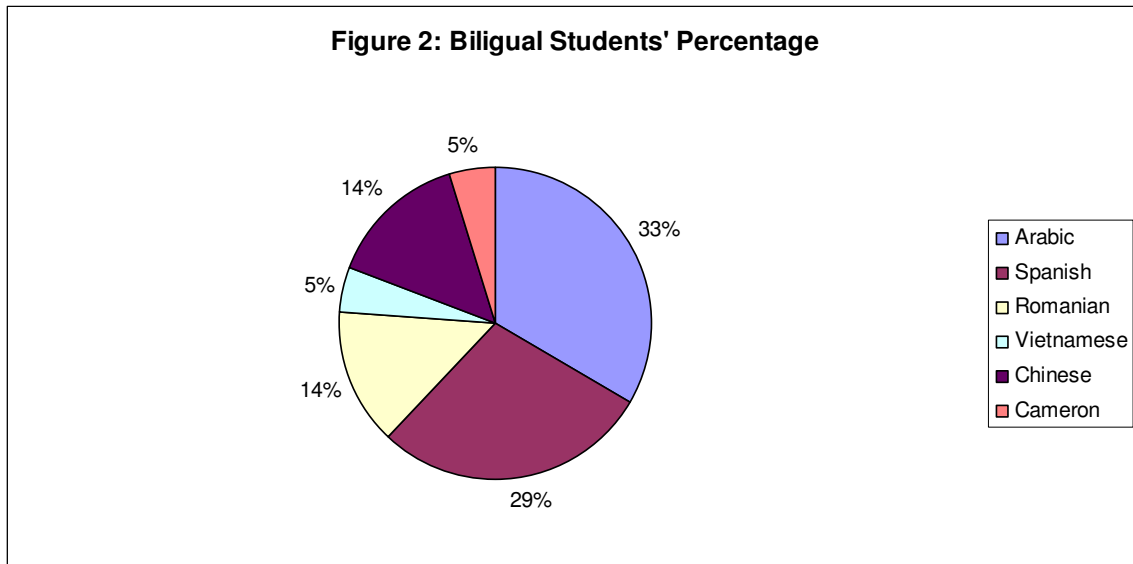
**STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY:** There are 21 students involved in this research (15 boys and 6 girls). They are divided between the different grades as follows:

2 students in Kg, 4 students in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, 6 students in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 5 students in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 1 student in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, 1 student in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 1 student in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, 1 student in 10<sup>th</sup> grade

**FOREIGN LANGUAGES SPOKEN:** The foreign languages the students speak are the following:

Arabic (7 students), Spanish (6 students), Romanian (3 students), Japanese (1 student), Chinese (3 students), Cameron (1 student)

Figure 2 is a pie representation of the percentage of each foreign language spoken.



## **Action Research Data Collection Techniques;**

Qualitative data collection techniques were used as the primary research methods for this study. The taxonomy of action research qualitative data collection techniques include the three Es: Experiencing, Enquiring, and Examining.

*Experiencing: Through observation and field notes:* For the purpose of my research, I was an observer participant taking field notes in the form of portfolio.

*Enquiring: When the researcher asks:* Gathering of my data included Formal interview, Structured Formal Interview and Standardized tests and Archival tests.

*Examining: Using and making records:* My field notes took the form of Journals and Artifacts as well as Archival documents.

## **Data Sources and Definitions;**

*The standardized test ELPA (Appendix 1)* - each spring, the State of Michigan implements the annual administration of the statewide English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA). The ELPA is administered to all English language learners who are enrolled in grades K through 12 and are eligible for limited English proficiency (LEP) services. The term English language learner, or ELL, has been adopted by the state of Michigan to refer to students who are limited English proficient (LEP).

The statewide administration of the ELPA was one of the first steps in improving the manner in which the English language proficiency of all ELL, students has been assessed. The second step is providing the ELPA Initial Screening as tool in determining eligibility for LEP services at the time of enrollment. The ELPA Initial Screening version is shorter in length and designed to be scored at the time of administration. Like the Spring ELPA, the ELPA Initial Screening contains all four domains (Listening,

Reading, Writing, and Speaking). The overall score is reflective of the proficiency levels that have been set for the annual administration of ELPA in spring.

*Questionnaire, Informal Interview, the Individual Learning Plan(Appendix 2):* The Second Set of Data consists of interview questions in the form of recommendations for Individual Learning Plan. Each student is considered an individual case. The learning plan for each student summarizes the teacher's comments on the progress of the students as well as the area of concern that still need to develop to achieve proficiency in English Language. The bilingual-ESL- Facilitator has to add her comments too.

*Questionnaire: Formal Interview: English Language Proficiency Progress Report (Appendix 3):* The state of Michigan has a set of English Language Proficiency Standards. Each includes a set of standards for acquiring proficiency in the three language areas: Listening, Speaking, Reading Comprehension, and Writing. The English Proficiency in each area is divided into three levels: Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4. Moreover, multiple criteria to meet each proficiency level are present in details. In order to comply with the Michigan English Language Proficiency Standards, a complete checklist for each student was prepared.

*Journal and Field notes (Appendix 4):* The bilingual/ESL services student log is a form that monitors the services given to the students. It includes information listing the content objectives, the language objectives, the dates and contact sessions as well as the materials used and any follow up with the teachers. This log provides an excellent tool to analyze the effectiveness of the instructional materials used on the progress of the student.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation;

### *ELPA results*

The data in the INDIVIDUAL STUDENT REPORT and ELPA results was transferred to an excel file and represented in a bar graph. The new graph is included in the INDIVIDUAL STUDENT PROFILE. The profile provides information on the Scale Score of the student compared to the Cut Score in the three language domains (Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking and Comprehension). The Scale Score is the score that the student receives in the English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA) test. The Cut Score is the minimum expected scale for a proficient student.

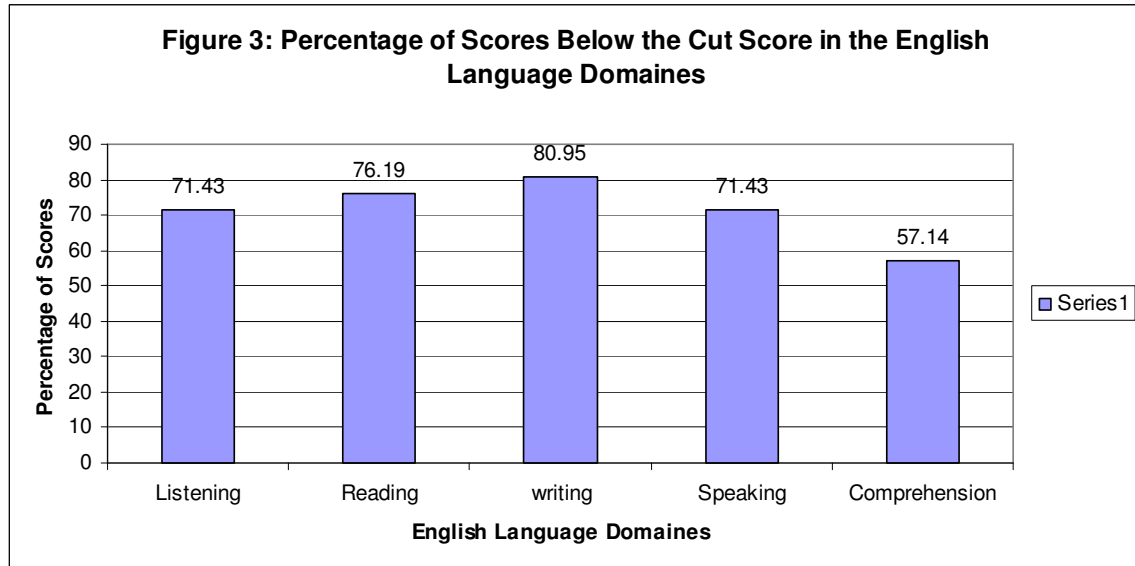
For the students who were served during the school year 2008-2009, the reports of spring 2009 ELPA test were used.

For the newly referred students, INITIAL ELPA SCREEING tests were carried out and the English proficiency levels of the students were determined. The number of students, who scored below the cut score of each of the five domains (listening, reading, writing, speaking and comprehension) of the language, was calculated. Consequently, the percentage was determined. Data are provided in the below table 1.

**Table 1: The number and percentage of bilingual students who scored below the ELPA cut score in each of the five domains of English.**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Number of students who scored below Cut Score</b>	<b>Percentage of students who scored below Cut Score</b>
<b>Listening</b>	15	71.43 %
<b>Reading</b>	16 (Kg not included)	76.19 %
<b>Writing</b>	17 (Kg not included)	80.95 %
<b>Speaking</b>	15	71.43 %
<b>Comprehension</b>	12 (kg not included)	57.14 %

The percentage was further depicted in figure 3 below.



### *Interview questionnaire; informal*

The First Set of Data submitted earlier, the Individual Student Profile, along with the Individual Learning Plan were evaluated by both the facilitator and the ESL consultant. The case of each student is evaluated individually. The ESL consultant determines whether the student needs service for the subsequent school year or not. For each student, both set of data are compared and analyzed as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> set of data (Individual Student Profile): It is an analysis of the student's performance on the ELPA test. It evaluates the student's performance in the Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking and Comprehension of English Language. The Performance Level of the students range from Basic to Proficient. The students who score Proficient may exit the ESL program. However, even with the proficient score, the student does not exit from the program until further analysis of the Individual Learning Plan.

2<sup>nd</sup> set of data (Individual Learning Plan): It is considered to be more important. It is a more direct evaluation of the student's proficiency in English. It is based on a whole school year of academic interaction between the student and the teacher as well as the facilitator. In special cases, it is more precise in determining the continuation of the ESL service. Below are examples of some special cases:

Case 1: K. is a student who received ESL services in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. She scored Proficient in ELPA, which made her eligible to exit the ESL program. When analyzing her Individual Learning Plan, her teacher commented that K. should still receive ESL service for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because she has a hearing loss in one ear. She also believed that K. still needs to improve her proper grammar usage. As a result, services continued for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Case 2: M. is a student who received ESL services in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. He scored Low Intermediate in the ELPA test. In his Individual Learning Plan, his teacher expressed her belief that M's poor performance was not due to his English language but to his inability to concentrate and taking his medication on time. Still, services continued for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Case 3: J. is a student who received ESL services in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. She scored Low Intermediate in ELPA. Analysis of the teacher's and facilitator comments in the Individual Learning Plan reveals that J's problems with English is mainly due to her inability to socialize and communicate well with her teacher and classmate. Service continued for the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade with more push-in classroom.

As described above, comparing and analyzing both sets of data help to determine the continuation of the ESL services as well as the future learning plan for each student.

### ***Questionnaire; formal Progress report;***

In order to comply with the Michigan English Language Proficiency Standards, a complete checklist for each student was prepared. The facilitator along with the teacher would meet and check the ability of the students to attain each of the Benchmarks or standards. This will ultimately convey the progress of the students and the effectiveness of the teaching strategy. Further collaborative support plans are discussed.

### ***Bilingual/ESL services student log***

This log provides an excellent tool to analyze the effectiveness of the instructional materials used on the progress of the student. Discussing with the teacher is a continuous collaborative process to fill any detected learning gaps. Emphasis differs from one student to another according to the type of the areas of concerns. That in turns specifies the type of services provided, which diverts to include: reading, writing, grammar, vocabularies, mathematic and sometimes science.

### **DISCUSSION AND ACTION PLAN;**

My action research was an ongoing studies focusing on groups as well as individual students. Preliminary data was collected, analyzed and interpreted. During my research, I worked on finding patterns (analysis) and making sense of those patterns (synthesis) to develop further action and data collection methods.

The first part of my research focused on collecting and analyzing the ELPA screening data which determined the best practices needed to improve the student's performance academically and socially. The student performance was analyzed in different environments besides the classroom, such as cafeteria and Gymnasium. This required an individual learning plan for each student according to the grade level, leading ultimately to differentiating the instruction.

I have the flexibility of pulling the student out of the classroom for service, or push in the classroom to work closely with the student in the normal exposure of the student's educational environment. Either support has its advantage depending on each student's individual needs. There has been an ongoing communication with the teacher to monitor the progress of the student. On the other hand, as presented in my literature review, I strongly agree with keeping the students in the mainstream class for the majority of the instructional time.

Personal reflection is an important result of any action research. That includes asking questions: How do my results affect my teaching practices? What did I learn and how can I help others to learn from my research? What kind of feedback I have received from sharing my results and study with others? Are there any modifications that may improve further my teaching strategies? What is the next action research cycle?

### ***Consideration and further recommendation***

*Support of the classroom instruction:* the bilingual service has to work side by side with the classroom instructor, mainly at the elementary level. Supporting the student with more comprehension of what is in the classroom, gives him/her the confidence to participate and be part of classroom community.

*Periodical discussion of the student progress:* Collaboration between the teacher and the facilitator will pin point the areas of concern. Further action plan for individual students can be put in place. Furthermore, collaboration and discussion of the Michigan Standards assure the compliance with those standards.

*Be a part of the school community:* Although the facilitator is employed by other organization than the school, it is important to be present in the school activities where the students are participating. This in turn will give a clear view on the social accommodation, which in some cases is a factor in learning. The facilitator develops a



one to one educational relationship with the student. His/her presence provides the student with confidence, and the courage to communicate and participate.

*Grammar:* Grammar provides the structure of the language. A student can not built without understanding how to structure. Students as early as the first grade can learn basic grammar. If students do not learn it in early grades, they will not be able to master this by themselves in later grades. Some bilingual high school students are still not able to construct a proper sentence with very basic grammatical rules. Spelling is to a large extent related to grammar. Punctuation is also mainly grammar.

*Reading:* Long passages with small details do not lit the students' eagerness for knowing. The State of Michigan Reading Standards has a nice variety which includes studying multicultural literature, science fiction, and plenty of informational texts. Such texts are more interesting for the students and equip them with a large reservoir of vocabularies. Those vocabularies are essential in developing the writing and comprehension talents of the language.

*Writing:* with the absence of proper foundation of grammar and vocabularies, writing is not a successful attempt. It is comment to use the expressions beginning, middle and end for organizing writing. However, these expressions are still not clear for some students. Other meaningful expressions can be used for the same purpose and provide the students with clear expectation of what to include in the beginning, middle and end. Briefing (instead of Beginning), Detailing (in the place of Middle), and Summarizing (to replace End) imply more for the student on what to include in each part.

*Sight Words:* Teaching sight words has to be reconsidered. The students tend to guess words by looking at the first letter, which affect their reading proficiencies.

Speaking a language other than English at home has a profound negative impact on the children acquisition of the language. Schools are the huge responsibility to overcome this impact. One the most successful procedure for this is introducing the

Bilingual Service Programs. This program would be more beneficial when the students are kept in the main stream setting, yet pulled out for bilingual help at least one hour per week. It is the classroom where the students are daily exposed to the language and they can acquire it from their classmates.

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