Newcomer Programs for Linguistically Diverse Students

Deborah J. Short and Beverly A. Boyson

The population of limited English proficient students is growing. Some of these students also lack core academic skills and knowledge in their first language. To assist recent immigrant students, newcomer programs have been implemented. This article describes the rationale for such programs, types of programs available, and their various features.

Many school districts face increasing numbers of middle- and high-school-aged immigrant students with limited proficiency in English. Many of these students also have limited literacy skills in their primary language, often as a result of limited formal schooling. Newcomer programs are designed to address the unique needs of these students. The goals of newcomer programs are to help students acquire beginning English language skills along with core academic skills and knowledge, and to acculturate these students to the U.S. school system. Some programs have additional goals, such as developing students’ primary language skills and preparing students for their new communities. This article focuses on newcomer programs at the middle school and high school levels.

Newcomer programs that have been identified to date vary in their definition of newcomers. Most include students who are recent arrivals to the United States and have limited proficiency in English (Short and Boyson 1998). Some programs select students who are below grade level or have had limited formal education. Others rely on a definition that is linked to federal

Note. This article is an adaptation of a chapter on secondary-level newcomer programs, written by Deborah J. Short and Beverly A. Boyson, from a report entitled Program Alternatives for Linguistically Diverse Students. The report was edited by Fred Genesee and published in 1999 by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE).

Deborah J. Short is English Language Multicultural Education division director and Beverly A. Boyson is a researcher at the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to dshort@cal.org.
aid: students who have been in the United States for three years or less and are limited English proficient (LEP).

There is considerable variation in the organization of newcomer programs. Many are programs-within-a-school, often found in the home school (by designated attendance area) of most, if not all, of the newcomer students. Students in these programs may also participate in some regular school activities outside the newcomer program, such as physical education and art. Upon exiting the newcomer program, students often remain at the same school to continue their studies in the regular program. Other newcomer programs are in separate locations; students exiting these programs then transfer to their home schools. Still other newcomer programs are located at district intake centers, where all English language learners are assessed and placed. For those designated as newcomers, the intake centers offer special, short-term courses before the students enter one of the regular schools in the district. In some districts, the newcomer center has been established at a single centralized site that serves all eligible newcomer students; in others, there are several newcomer centers that serve eligible students in designated sectors. In a few districts, not all newcomer students can be served due to limited resources.

**Theoretical Rationale for Newcomer Programs**

English language learners who are recent immigrants are often at risk of educational failure or early dropout due to underdeveloped first language literacy skills, limited English language skills, or weak academic skills. The needs of these students often surpass the resources of English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual programs. Generally speaking, newcomer programs are designed to prepare immigrant students to participate successfully in a district’s language support program. Several specific and often overlapping considerations and beliefs influence the decision to establish a newcomer program:

- The need to address the unique literacy needs of English language learners more effectively than is possible in a classroom with both literate and nonliterate students.
- The belief that a welcoming and nurturing environment is beneficial to older immigrant students (those of secondary school age, 12–21 years old) who may have limited prior experience with schooling.
- The need to provide middle and high school immigrant students with core academic skills and knowledge that fill gaps in their educational backgrounds and move them closer to their age-level peers, better preparing them to participate in mainstream classrooms.
• The assumption that the chances of educational success for immigrant students are enhanced when connections between the school and students’ families and communities are established and reinforced.

Salient Pedagogical and Program Features

The pedagogical and programmatic features of newcomer programs differ according to their educational goals, site options, available staff, and resources. Many programs serve newcomer students for the full school day. A full-day schedule provides time to offer several content area courses along with English language instruction. Others operate on a half-day schedule, sometimes in order to accommodate two groups of students at one site—for example, middle school students in the morning and high school students in the afternoon—or to promote more interaction with the entire student population at the school. A few programs operate after school, and students attend on a volunteer basis. Most newcomer programs are designed to educate students for one year, although some offer an additional summer program. About one-third of newcomer programs last more than one year, and a limited number are full-length, four-year high schools; students enter in the ninth grade and remain in the program until graduation.

Newcomer programs may designate themselves as primarily ESL or bilingual programs and follow appropriate instructional designs. Some offer both ESL and bilingual options: for example, content course instruction in Spanish for Spanish speakers and sheltered content instruction in English for speakers of other languages. Some programs distinguish between nonliterate and literate students. Literate students may have one set of courses available to them and may stay in the program for one school year, whereas nonliterate students have additional literacy-level courses and may stay in the program for 18–24 months. In describing pedagogical and program features of newcomer programs, it is useful to distinguish between common and variable features to capture the diversity among them. Common features are those that characterize virtually all newcomer programs. Variable features are those that may differ from one newcomer program to another.

Common Features

A program or set of courses distinct from the regular language support program. The newcomer program is generally designed to provide intensive, specialized instruction for a limited period of time and thus offers courses that are distinctive to the program: for example, courses that facilitate students’ social and cultural integration into American life or courses designed for students with limited literacy development.

Instructional strategies for initial literacy development. Many newcomer students become literate for the first time in these programs (in their first
language and/or in English) despite the fact that they are beyond the normal age of initial literacy instruction in the United States. Thus instructors in newcomer programs use special strategies to teach literacy to adolescent students.

**Instructional strategies for the integration of language and content.** Sheltered and bilingual content instruction are planned to promote the development of core academic skills and knowledge while furthering students’ English language development.

**Courses or activities for student orientation to U.S. schools and the community.** Newcomer programs seek to familiarize students with American culture, their community, and school routines and educational expectations in the United States. Many programs supplement classroom curricula with field trips, cultural activities, and special events that serve these acculturation goals.

**Qualified teachers.** Many newcomer programs are selective in the recruitment of their instructional personnel, looking for teachers and paraprofessionals experienced in working with recent immigrants in literacy, bilingual, or sheltered classes. Support staff who are bilingual and familiar with the students’ first languages and cultures are also sought for the additional resources they bring to the program.

**Appropriate materials.** Instructional materials are cognitively appropriate for the ages of the students and include modifications that are appropriate for their level of language development, especially literacy. Content materials are selected to help students establish the foundations of academic subjects they may not have studied and to further their current academic knowledge. Literature in English and the students’ first languages is also important.

**Paraprofessional support.** Almost all newcomer programs employ paraprofessional support, especially bilingual staff, to assist students in academic domains and primary language literacy development and to facilitate links between the school and the students’ families.

**Family connections.** Most programs seek to include the whole family in the life of the school; they arrange family events, adult ESL classes, and so forth for them. They also help families link up with appropriate social and health services in the community, as needed.

**Variable Features**

**Length of daily program.** Depending on available resources and the types of students being served, the program may involve one or two course periods, half the school day, the full school day, or after-school activities.
Length of program enrollment. Although most programs last from one to three semesters, the actual length of time students spend in a newcomer program is often decided on an individual basis according to their linguistic and academic needs.

Grade levels served. Some programs serve all grade levels in the school’s category (e.g., grades 6–8 for middle school programs and grades 9–12 for high schools). Some combine middle and high school students in one location but do not mix the two levels, except perhaps for initial literacy instruction. Some programs organize students by English proficiency levels rather than by traditional grade-level divisions. Other sites are designated, for example, as ninth-grade schools, where high school-age students with eight years of schooling or less may attend for one year, then move on to tenth grade in one of the other district high schools.

ESL or bilingual design. The instructional and philosophical design of particular programs depends on the participating students’ first languages and the availability of appropriate bilingual teachers, paraprofessionals, and instructional materials.

Articulation. Effective programs have an articulated plan for moving students through the language development and content courses offered and into regular programs in the district (ESL, bilingual, or mainstream). Articulation includes a sequenced curriculum for English language acquisition as well as a series of courses to help students either maintain and further their academic skills and knowledge or to address gaps in their educational backgrounds.

Content course selection/options for students. The program may offer sheltered or bilingual courses in some or all core content areas and in some elective areas, depending on the length of the daily program, student needs, and the availability of qualified staff and appropriate materials. The selection of course options is considered seriously because it is linked to course credits at the high school level and can thus have an impact on graduation.

Career education. Some programs offer career awareness courses, vocational education, or work internships so that students can develop practical skills and knowledge about job opportunities. This training is useful for those students who are not inclined toward postsecondary academic options or do not have enough time to finish high school because of age restrictions.

Assessment. Some programs use preselected test scores as entrance and exit criteria and also to determine progress and achievement. Alternative assessments, such as portfolios, are used in other programs to monitor students’ ongoing progress.
**Necessary Resources**

**Location.** When establishing a newcomer program, location is important. Many programs are programs-within-a-school, where space and staffing resources are readily available. Some districts choose a central location, either within another school or at a separate site, and transport students from around the district to the school to maximize their use of space and staffing resources.

**Transportation.** Special transportation is necessary in the case of centralized programs, where students are brought from their home schools to the newcomer school for part of the day or for the full school day. When students attend programs-within-a-school, they can use regular school transportation.

**Trained staff.** Successful programs hire staff who are trained to work with recent immigrant students. Their knowledge base should include literacy skills development, strategies for integrating language and content instruction, cross-cultural awareness, and second language acquisition. The type of staff who are available may determine the type of instruction that is offered. For example, if the student population represents many different first languages but bilingual teachers or paraprofessionals who know all these languages are not available, the best option may be ESL and sheltered content instruction.

**Leadership.** Program administrators and principals play an important role as advocates for newcomer programs and students. They also coordinate instruction, staff development, and connections with receiving schools. Leadership is often critical to secure adequate funding and to make sure program evaluations take place so that policy makers have systematic data showing the benefits of a newcomer program.

**Guidance.** In some programs, the regular guidance counselors in the school serve newcomer students as well. Other programs (often larger programs or whole newcomer schools) have their own guidance counselors. In large districts with many immigrant students, intake centers and guidance counselors cooperate to facilitate placement and transition processes. They also assist students with adjustment issues and help connect them with appropriate social and health services as needed. It is preferable to find guidance counselors who are bilingual and who are familiar with the students’ cultures.

**Appropriate materials.** ESL or bilingual materials are necessary and may be readily available. Materials for the literacy development of older students are often needed and may be more difficult to obtain. Often, teaching staff develop their own curricula, materials, and assessment instruments for the programs.
Translators and interpreters. Personnel with translation and interpretation skills are important for parental outreach and for communication between students and guidance counselors and other school personnel.

Necessary Local Conditions

Population. To be feasible, a newcomer program must have access to a sufficient number of newcomer students with educational needs that are not met successfully in the regular ESL or bilingual programs. The size of the immigrant student population in need of special services and the particular first languages and cultures they represent will influence the type and length of program and the program’s location.

Identification and placement. Newcomer programs need a plan and policy for identification and placement of students. Criteria are often related to scores on English proficiency tests. Many newcomer programs rely on district intake centers to assess and place students.

Transition procedures. Because the overall aim of newcomer programs is to prepare students for success in the district’s regular programs, the transition process is critical, especially for students who must switch schools when they leave the newcomer program. Teachers and guidance counselors in newcomer programs should oversee the transition and help students plan their course schedules in their new program. Some sites organize school visits and classroom observations. Personnel in full-day programs at separate sites usually find it necessary to devote more attention to transition procedures than do personnel in half-day programs-within-a-school.

Professional development. The teachers in the newcomer program and the teachers who receive the students once they exit the program should participate in joint staff development so they can better meet the students’ cognitive, linguistic, academic, and emotional needs.

Case Studies

As noted, newcomer programs use a wide range of designs. To illustrate the variation among program types, descriptions of several program types are presented below. Each case is identified according to its distinguishing features. More detail about the various program types and their features can be found in Short and Boyson (1997, 1998).

Special Course, Program-Within-a-School, One Year

This countywide program in the eastern United States has developed a special literacy course for newcomer students who have few or no literacy skills in their first language. It is offered at the middle and high school levels,
where and when student enrollment merits. Students take the newcomer literacy course in conjunction with other courses, such as ESL and sheltered math, sheltered science, and sheltered social studies, in the regular language support programs at their schools. Specially trained teachers work with these students.

**Half Day, Program-Within-a-School, One Year**

This middle school participates in a districtwide program for newcomers who have little formal education. Students who are performing below the third grade level, as determined by a diagnostic test, qualify for this half-day program. Instruction in math, science, and social studies is provided in the students’ first language (Haitian Creole or Spanish) along with ESL and an orientation to school and study skills. The goal of the program is for students to reach basic skills level after one year, then enter the regular ESL program in the school.

**Half Day, Separate Site, One-plus Year**

This half-day program located at a separate site in a western U.S. school district serves multilingual middle and high school students for up to one and one-half years. It operates two cycles per day, with one set of students in the morning and another in the afternoon. All students spend half the day at the newcomer center and the other half at their home schools. Carefully selected trained staff work closely with the home school sites to ensure that the curricula of the two schools are complementary. Most instruction is offered in English using sheltered instruction, but bilingual instruction in social studies, language arts, U.S. history, and world history is available to students of certain language backgrounds. Bilingual staff and paraprofessionals help students maintain their primary languages.

**Full Day, Separate Site, One Year**

This full-day newcomer school in the Southwest serves middle and high school students for one year, providing English language instruction as well as academic instruction appropriate to their grade levels and educational backgrounds. Core sheltered instruction in math, science, reading, and social studies is provided. Electives in art, music, computers, and career investigation are also available. First language literacy courses are offered to Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking students. Bilingual paraprofessionals assist the teachers. Most students transfer after one year to a middle or high school in their neighborhood and enter the ESL program there. Some students with very low literacy may remain at the newcomer school for an additional semester.
Full Day, Separate Site, Four Years

This alternative high school in the northeastern United States offers a four-year, full-day program to students who have been in the country for less than four years and received low English language scores on the district test. They must also have a guidance counselor’s recommendation. This program has graduated approximately 95 percent of its multilingual students in its more than 10 years of operation, and approximately 90 percent of those graduates have gone on to postsecondary institutions. Instruction is given primarily in English, and all teachers are responsible for developing the students’ language skills while teaching them regular subjects. In recent years, some first language instruction has been provided. Most students enter the program in ninth grade and remain in the school the entire four years, although some may transfer to another high school in the district. Students may take some college courses once they meet graduation requirements, and all participate in work-site internships. Some of the internships use the students’ primary languages.

References
