Among all the commercial “learning systems” on the market today, the award for most extravagant promises should go to SIOP®, the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol:

“Field tested ... scientifically validated ... a proven pedagogical approach [that] has helped to instruct millions of students,” including not only English learners but English-proficient children, as well. It is now being marketed as an effective model for K–12, early childhood, foreign language, GED and adult programs, and even two-way bilingual education.

There are old-time patent medicines that made fewer claims. Is SIOP a truly miraculous pedagogy — good for whatever ails you? Or is it a classic example of “research-based” hype?

The Trouble with SIOP® was inspired by a chorus of complaints from teachers, who are increasingly required to apply the model by top-down directives. Recognizing that SIOP had never faced much critical scrutiny, authors James Crawford and Sharon Adelman Reyes set out to determine:

First, is this rigid approach, which requires teachers to incorporate “30 features and eight components” into every lesson, necessary to foster English acquisition and academic achievement? Or does SIOP, as a classic transmission model, impose a straitjacket on creative teaching and learning? Aren’t there better ways to “shelter” and “scaffold” instruction?

Second, does this heterogeneous mixture of methodologies and strategies reflect a coherent educational philosophy, consistent with research on second language acquisition? Or is SIOP essentially a grab-bag of “best practices,” with a heavy emphasis on behaviorist methods?

Finally, does research on this program support the lavish claims made on its behalf? Or is the What Works Clearinghouse at the U.S. Department of Education correct in concluding that none of the studies conducted thus far have demonstrated SIOP’s effectiveness?

The answers provided by The Trouble with SIOP® should interest those concerned not only with the education of English language learners, but also with the pernicious impact of commercial pedagogies in American classrooms.