



SHIFTING THE PERSPECTIVE

The case for dual language programs as the gold standard for achieving educational equity in schools

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the United States spends far more on education than any other country in the world, yet it continues to produce vastly inequitable outcomes, especially for so-called English learners (ELs)—multilinguals enrolled in U.S. schools whose knowledge of English is insufficient for equitable access to academic content delivered solely in English.

Although there are numerous factors that contribute to the systemic failure of many schools to meet the needs of ELs, the root of the problem, we believe, is the term itself: *English learner*.

English learner, a term widely used by most educators and policymakers in the U.S., lies at the root of how most schools have educated and continue to (mis)educate this group of students. Simply put: EL is positioned from a deficit framework and is used to describe what learners lack and what the system of schooling expects them to gain (English) while ignoring the learners' cultural and linguistic assets that are rooted in identity, family, history, and community.

Under the EL paradigm, the traditional structure and organization of schooling has segregated and continues to segregate many ELs by race, class, and language within their school, often leading to students developing an internalized oppression and/or an oppositional culture toward school in the upper grades. This phenomenon is perhaps best described in the book *Subtractive Schooling*

by Angela Valenzuela (SUNY Press), who states, "In a world that does not value bilingualism or biculturalism, youth may fall prey to the subtle yet unrelenting message of the worthlessness of their communities."

The EL ideology reinforces the belief that English classes are a service rather than subject matter, thus English language learning curricula remains optional. In this way, the purpose of current language classes is to "help" ELs learn English, not to allow them, as well as native English speakers, to become bilingual. The result: Most ELs are victims of an inappropriate and problematic curriculum. Sadly, their academic underperformance is predictable.

From an asset-based perspective, ELs are considered dual language learners (DLLs) or, more appropriately, multiple language learners (MLLs), and, in turn, schools embrace the benefits of

being bilingual or multilingual for all students. We prefer the term *MLL* as a significant number of students in the U.S. already know (i.e., speak or sign) multiple languages other than English when they enter formal schooling. Multilingualism is most common among students who are recent immigrants into the U.S. as well.

Myths about English learners

Perhaps the most common myth is that "learning two languages during early childhood will overwhelm, confuse, and/or delay acquisition of English," states Linda Espinosa in a 2013 report for the Foundation for Child Development. Another myth illustrated in her report is that "total English immersion...is the best way for a young [MLL] to acquire English." Yet evidence suggests the opposite: English-only schooling has proven destructive to

students' academic outcomes, native language preservation, and cultural identity. On the other hand, methods employed by schools that are often described as being “bilingual” are not necessarily better.

Perhaps the most significant reason why the EL teaching methods are inadequate is that they are rarely implemented long enough for students to reach grade-level proficiency in a second language. Research consistently suggests that it takes five to seven years to attain academic fluency in a second language. Dual language models, or language immersion models, have been aligned to this research for decades.

In fact, over 15 years ago, Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier, two widely respected scholars on the topic, called out the “astounding effectiveness of dual language education for all” in the *NABE Journal of Research and Practice*. So the time for school leaders and teachers to get on board is long overdue.

It's time that all students benefit from learning more than one language.

The term *dual language* has been described in different ways in the literature; however, scholars such as Nancy Cloud, Elizabeth Howard, and their colleagues categorize dual language programs into four models:

1. *Developmental bilingual programs*, where language minority students are grouped by the same language and academic instruction is provided in the students' native language and English as a foreign language
2. *Two-way immersion*, where an equal number of English speakers learn alongside native speakers of another language and both groups of students together learn academic content in both languages
3. *Heritage language immersion*, where an entire group of native English speakers is provided instruction in English and in the heritage language of that group
4. *Foreign language immersion*, where an entire group of native English speakers from various cultural/racial groups are provided instruction in English and the second language

The gold standard

Dual language models are dynamic, as they can exist in multiple languages within the same school. For example, the San Diego–based Language Academy is a K–8 school that offers two concurrent programs: a two-way immersion program where half of the students are native Spanish speakers and half are already fluent in English, and a foreign language program in which a group of English speakers are immersed in French. These two language cohorts, while at the same school, receive separate instruction from kindergarten to fifth grade, and then are merged for grades six through eight and provided with a traditional pull-out language instruction model.

An eighth-grade math teacher, a veteran of more than 20 years, described it as “a United Nations approach to teaching and the impact is clear; we have happy kiddos, high scores, and they each speak two or three languages.”

Readers should not be surprised to learn that many of the students in models similar to the Language Academy obtain advanced placement credit in their non-English language (Spanish or French) when in eighth grade and excel across all other academic content areas. In San Diego, these students feed into a high school currently ranked second best in SAT scores while qualifying for above 95% free and reduced-price lunch status.

In a recent article published in *The Atlantic*, Michael Bacon, director of dual language programs in Portland, OR, argued, “If we really, truly are reflective about our history and our country, if we want to stop the systems of repression, if we want to uplift our people and uplift our country, then I think [dual language] is one of the best investments that any community, that any school system, can make.”

Two-way dual language programs represent a paradigm shift in the

conceptualization of schooling from the traditional model of education. Two-way dual language models are unique, as they work under the premise that acquiring a second language should be an additive process, with the goals of biliteracy, bilingualism, and biculturalism.

Moving forward

Our work offers a brief conceptual argument for making dual language programs the standard, not the exception. The growing popularity of dual language programming in cities such as Portland, New York, San Diego, and Salt Lake City encourage us.

Opening new dual language programs cannot be done overnight and several factors, such as careful planning, continuous professional development, and family involvement, are required to ensure that dual language programs are both sustainable and successful. This model of schooling holds the key to making the U.S. a more equitable and more culturally responsive country.

As more teachers, families, students, and administrators become more knowledgeable about the benefits, more dual language schools will take root and grow.

We know this because we are not just scholars who write this. We are teachers and parents actively involved in working to grow and sustain these schools in our own communities. ■

WHERE WE STAND

Dual language scholars Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier are the principal authors of ILA's new literacy leadership brief *The Role of Bilingualism in Improving Literacy Achievement*. Download the brief at literacyworldwide.org/statements.

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