



## The Multiple Benefits of Dual Language

Dual-language programs educate both English learners and native English speakers without incurring extra costs.

Wayne P. Thomas and Virginia P. Collier

During the past 10 years of conducting research on English language programs and school effectiveness, we have discovered the key to the successful future of U.S. education: meaningful, grade-level, and accelerated instruction in two languages—English and another language spoken in the school community—throughout the school years.

In many states—especially in Texas, New Mexico, New York, California, Illinois, and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area—active dual-language programs are providing win-win advantages for all students. English learners have an opportunity to make faster-than-average progress on grade-level instruction that is not watered down. Native English speakers who are already on grade level can exceed the achievement of their monolingually educated peers. And through the cognitive stimulus of schooling in two languages, which leads to enhanced creativity and analytical thinking, native English speakers who are lagging behind academically receive the accelerated instruction necessary to close the achievement gap. All student groups in dual-language classes benefit from meaningful, challenging, and accelerated—not remedial—instruction (Baker, 2001).

Some dual-language programs in North America have developed as *one-way programs* provided for speakers of one language. Throughout Canada, for example, bilingual immersion programs provide instruction in both French and English to one language group, native English speakers. In the United States, one-way bilingual immersion programs teach native English speakers in two languages—English and Japanese, for example—and confer full proficiency and mastery of the curriculum in two languages.

Other one-way dual-language programs in the United States are designed for English learners who continue optimum cognitive development in their first language—for example, Spanish—at the same time that they are learning the curriculum in English. These one-way programs for English learners exist only in demographic contexts where there are few or no native English speakers in the schools.

*Two-way dual-language programs* educate English learners and native English speakers together, combining the instructional advantages of both types of one-way program. Effective two-way dual-language programs provide

- A minimum of six years of bilingual instruction;
- A focus on the core academic curriculum rather than a watered-down version;



October 2003

- High-quality language arts instruction in both languages, integrated into thematic units;
- Separation of the two languages for instruction (no translation and no repeated lessons in the other language);
- Use of the non-English language for at least 50 percent of the instructional time and as much as 90 percent in the early grades;
- An additive (that is, adding a new language at no cost to students' first language) bilingual environment that has full support of school administrators, teachers, and parents;
- Promotion of positive interdependence among peers and between teachers and students;
- High-quality instructional personnel, proficient in the language of instruction; and
- Active parent-school partnerships (Howard & Christian, 2002; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

This approach allows English learners to help native English speakers learn through a second language, while native English speakers help English learners acquire the curriculum through English. As most teachers know, one of the best ways to learn is to teach, and both student groups receive accelerated instructional benefits from their other-language peers and from the teacher's use of collaborative learning strategies that capitalize on this effect. Also, learning together increases student interest in the school and curriculum topics, improving student motivation to learn and further amplifying and accelerating student progress (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; Freeman, 1998; Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 1997/1998, 1999).

## **Meeting the Needs of English Learners**

Why are these dual-language programs only now becoming more common? In the past, U.S. schools encouraged most native English speakers to learn a foreign language, but only in the context of separate language courses rather than half of the instructional year. Also, schools viewed most English learners as “broken” and in need of fixing, just as many schools treat Title I and special education students today. Transitional bilingual programs assisted English learners to gradually de-emphasize their first language and learn English as their exclusive language of instruction. Various similar forms of English-only instruction—for example, English as a Second Language (ESL) taught in pullout programs or through ESL content classes or structured English immersion—encouraged English learners to abandon their first languages in favor of instruction in English.

The debate about whether “bilingual” or “English-only” instruction is better for English learners has been long and rancorous. In the 1990s, several large-scale studies and meta-analyses showed that English learners made slightly higher gains per year in typical transitional bilingual programs than they did in typical English-only programs (Greene, 1997; Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, & Pasta, 1991). Our large-scale research in the late 1990s (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002), however, found that transitional bilingual programs and English-only programs close at most only half of the achievement gap between native English speakers and English learners. In other words, if closing the achievement gap is the measure of program success, both transitional bilingual education and English-only instruction are inadequate.

The 2001 No Child Left Behind federal legislation aims to close the achievement gap by measuring adequate yearly progress on test scores that have been disaggregated by student groups, such as Hispanics and English learners. In response to the legislation, educators are

turning their attention to programs that demonstrably close the achievement gap for English learners and other disaggregated groups while also increasing all students' mastery of state education standards. After reviewing the research,<sup>1</sup> educators have realized that dual-language programs offer a pragmatic way to meet the federal legislation's ambitious goals.

Federal officials still need to correct two major flaws in the NCLB legislation, however. The first flaw is the requirement to compare the performance of this year's students with that of last year's students instead of following the progress of the same students over time. Because one class and one school can change dramatically from year to year, the cross-sectional comparison does not measure students' actual progress.

Nor does the legislation address the issue of how long it takes for English learners to close their achievement gap with native English-speaking students. Policymakers have converged on the politically expedient three-year limit for extra instructional support, and both educators and policymakers are engaging in wishful thinking when they assume that minimally-achieving former English learners will continue to close the achievement gap—that is, gain faster than native English speakers do—after they leave their special program and enter the mainstream classroom. Research shows that even the most effective programs require five to six years to bring English learners to full parity with average native English speakers in English proficiency and in mastery of the curriculum to high standards.

Educators and policymakers must face the facts here—a three-year special program of average effectiveness will not lead to long-term closure of the achievement gap and attainment of standards for most English learners. To meet No Child Left Behind's requirements for gap closure, schools need to aim for students' full mastery of the curriculum, choose effective programs, sustain them for five to six years to achieve full gap closure, and provide additional assistance in the mainstream for former English learners who have not received a dual-language program.

## **The Beauty of Dual-Language Education**

The instructional infrastructure of dual-language programs provides greatly increased educational productivity because it offers full rather than partial achievement gap closure at annual costs comparable with existing programs. Traditional programs for English learners provide only remedial, watered-down instruction in “playground English,” virtually guaranteeing that the native English speakers will outperform English learners and thus widen the achievement gap over time.

English learners need enriched, sustained forms of instruction that allow them to receive support in their first language while learning a second language. Dual-language programs offer English learners a mainstream curriculum, which leads to full English proficiency and curricular mastery, with instruction provided by monolingual and multilingual teachers who already work within the school system.

In our research of the Houston, Texas, Independent School District (Thomas & Collier, 2002), English learners who received five years of dual-language schooling reached the 51st percentile on the Stanford 9—a nationally normed test in English—after having initially qualified five years before for English learner services by scoring low on English proficiency tests. The majority of these students were of low socioeconomic status, receiving free or reduced-price lunches. In comparison, a matched group participating in the same district's effective transitional bilingual program scored at only the 34th percentile after five years. Many of the dual-language schools in Houston (56 schools to date, and increasing in number every year) and elsewhere in Texas have received recognition as superior, high-scoring schools by the Texas education system, a

notable achievement because many also serve low socioeconomic groups.

Dual-language programs also provide integrated, inclusive, and unifying education experiences for their students, in contrast to the segregated, exclusive, and divisive education characteristics of many traditional English-only and transitional bilingual programs. The atmosphere of inclusiveness in the dual-language milieu meets the cultural needs of minorities and provides opportunities for them to experience the world of their nonminority peers.

Just as important, nonminority students expand their worldviews to include knowledge of and respect for the customs and experiences of others. Native English-speaking children receive many of the benefits of travel to, and life in, other countries, along with an increased understanding of other cultures. Many dual-language students value these early experiences, and, as high school graduates, they actively seek opportunities for international travel and employment that uses their second language.

Native English speakers also benefit academically. In Houston in 2000, native English speakers who had been in the two-way dual-language programs for four years scored between the 63rd and 70th percentiles in total reading scores on the Stanford 9, whereas the scores of native English speakers in the mainstream hovered around the 50th percentile. When tested in Spanish using the Aprenda 2, the dual-language native English speakers scored between the 65th and 87th percentiles at the end of grades 2–5, with an average score equivalent to the 76th percentile. These native English speakers, including African American students, not only scored higher than their monolingually educated peers, but they also acquired a second language for their lifelong use.

## **Recommendations for Education Leaders**

Our research in 23 school districts in 15 states and our analyses of more than 2 million student records show that dual-language programs can close the achievement gap for English learners and provide a superior education for native English speakers. We recommend the following steps:

- For schools now using a transitional bilingual program—typically a 2–3-year remedial program for English learners—we recommend an immediate upgrade, using the same teachers, to a one-way or two-way dual-language program.
- If a school is now using a minimal English-only program—pullout programs for English as a Second Language or structured English immersion—we recommend improving these programs by adding first-language support wherever possible, emulating the enrichment characteristics of well-designed dual-language programs, and extending the length of these programs to at least five to six years to allow for full closure of the achievement gap.
- Teachers, principals, and policymakers should supplement the data collection required by No Child Left Behind with well-designed longitudinal comparisons of how the same students fare over time. Such comparisons provide a better assessment of student progress and may serve to explain persuasively why and how apparent “deficiencies” are really the result of year-to-year fluctuations in student population rather than the result of inadequate programs.
- Educators should actively seek to improve the program by adding more features each year from the feature-rich dual-language program guidelines (see, for example, Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003).
- Educators should provide teachers with preparation and professional development that

focuses on the specifics of dual-language implementation (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003).

By implementing one-way or two-way dual-language programs, schools can expect one-fifth to one-sixth of the achievement gap for English learners to close each year (Thomas & Collier, 2002). And they can look forward to both English learners and native English speakers being fully prepared for high-stakes tests. The pass rate should be approximately equal for both groups, a vast improvement over the present pattern of overrepresentation of English learners among those who do not pass. We encourage school leaders and policymakers to find ways to adopt as many of the characteristics of dual-language programs as possible and to fulfill the promise of No Child Left Behind.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The following Web sites provide extensive information and research on dual-language education: [www.cal.org/twi](http://www.cal.org/twi); [www.crede.ucsc.edu](http://www.crede.ucsc.edu); [www.duallanguagenm.org](http://www.duallanguagenm.org); [www.ncela.gwu.edu](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu); [www.texastwoway.org](http://www.texastwoway.org).

## References

- Baker, C. (2001). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (3rd ed.). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Calderón, M. E., & Minaya-Rowe, L. (2003). *Designing and implementing two-way bilingual programs*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Freeman, R. D. (1998). *Bilingual education and social change*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Greene, J. P. (1997). A meta-analysis of the Rossell and Baker review of bilingual education research. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 21, 103–122.
- Howard, E. R., & Christian, D. (2002). *Two-way immersion 101: Designing and implementing a two-way immersion education program at the elementary level*. Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, University of California-Santa Cruz.
- Lindholm-Leary, K. J. (2001). *Dual-language education*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Ramirez, J. D., Yuen, S. D., Ramey, D. R., & Pasta, D. J. (1991). *Final report: Longitudinal study of structured English immersion strategy, early-exit and late-exit transitional bilingual education programs for language minority children*. San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International.
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (1997). *School effectiveness for language minority students*. (NCBE Resource Collection Series, No. 9). Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. Available: [www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/resource/effectiveness/index.htm](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/resource/effectiveness/index.htm)
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (1997/1998). Two languages are better than one. *Educational Leadership*, 55 (4), 23–26.
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (1999). Accelerated schooling for English-language

learners. *Educational Leadership*, 56 (7), 46–49.

Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement*. Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence, University of California-Santa Cruz. Available: [www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1\\_final.html](http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1_final.html)

---

**Wayne P. Thomas** ([wthomas@gmu.edu](mailto:wthomas@gmu.edu)) is Professor of Research and Evaluation Methods and **Virginia P. Collier** ([vcollier@gmu.edu](mailto:vcollier@gmu.edu)) is Professor of Bilingual/Multicultural/ESL Education, Graduate School of Education, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.

Copyright © 2003 by ASCD

---

[Contact Us](#) | [Copyright Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

© 2009 ASCD