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The Role of Bilingualism in Improving Literacy Achievement

International Literacy Association | 2019

Educators in the United States have worked for decades to create school environments where exciting learning takes place, with students deeply engaged as they expand their ways to explore new knowledge. Although some schools provide cutting-edge opportunities for middle-class students, the challenges continue for underserved students who start school hopeful but leave disappointed.

African American and Latino students are the largest underserved groups in U.S. schools. But a data-driven movement no one could have predicted a few decades ago shows promise: Bilingualism is becoming popular after a century of English monolingualism encouraged throughout the U.S. in the 1900s and fueled by the English-only movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

The world is changing increasingly as the internet connects everyone and global markets expand in creativity and innovations. Families who are native English speakers are viewing this expansion of opportunities for their children and demanding earlier development of languages other than English in school. At the state level, governors and state boards of education have begun to see the importance of state-sponsored initiatives in dual language schooling for the long-term benefits to their state economies.

These efforts initially began in Delaware, North Carolina, and Utah, and other states are not far behind. Dual language schooling for both native English speakers and English learners has grown in popularity as more state governments, school districts, school leaders, and families have become aware of the benefits for everyone involved.

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The Standard Curriculum Taught Through Two Languages

Dual language education, a program that started in a few U.S. schools in the 1960s, has matured into a full-fledged mainstream program, with the standard curriculum taught through two languages. Over time, it has become a powerful means of appropriately serving culturally and linguistically diverse populations together with native English speakers of varied socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

All student groups in these dual language programs are doing well in school as measured by school tests. By middle school,

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dual language students are typically one or two grade levels ahead of their peers not in dual language. They are also outperforming their peers not in dual language classes in every measurable aspect—dual language students are cognitively more advanced, are happier, are more engaged with instruction, have higher self-esteem and confidence, attend school more regularly, experience significantly fewer behavioral referrals, and have dramatically higher high school graduation rates.

This is especially evident in the longitudinal data following African American and Latino students attending dual language classes, the two largest groups most underserved by monolingual-English U.S. school programs of the 20th century. How and why are these two groups so well served by dual language school programs, including especially those of low socioeconomic status (as measured by participation in free and reduced lunch)?

English Learners Belong in Mainstream Dual Language Classes

We first examine program choices for those Latinos who, when they initially enter U.S. schools, are tested and classified as not proficient in English. These English learners might be recent arrivals who have emigrated from their home country because of challenging circumstances or they may be born in the U.S. (the majority being U.S. born). Some live in poverty, whereas others are middle class.

English learners benefit from placement in dual language classes in English and in their home language, whatever their grade level when they arrive. Dual language education is the mainstream grade-level curriculum, taught through two languages, with native English speakers and English learners working together throughout each school day. In the U.S., English is required and must be taught through all grades. The other instructional language is the choice of the school and the parent community, and most schools choose the home language of the largest number of English learners.

Because Spanish is the primary language of 77% of English learners in the U.S., Spanish-English programs are chosen most commonly. Families who are native English speakers typically prefer this language choice as well, because Spanish is the language spoken most frequently in the world after Mandarin

Chinese, as defined by number of native speakers. Also, the U.S. now has the second largest number of Spanish speakers in the world after Mexico, and most of these speak English as well.

In addition, there are U.S. dual language programs taught in English and Arabic, Armenian, Bengali, Cantonese, Filipino, French, German, Greek, Haitian Creole, Hebrew, Hmong, Italian, Japanese, Khmer, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian, Urdu, and Vietnamese, and the list is growing every year.

Dual language programs are provided in the following American Indian languages as well: Arapahoe, Cherokee, Crow, Diné (Navajo), Hupa, Inupiaq, Keres, Lakota, Nahuatl, Ojibwe, Passamaquoddy, Shoshoni, Ute, and Yurok. As of this writing, more than 2,208 dual language schools in the U.S. have registered on the website duallanguageschools.org, and we estimate that there are many more. This is a school reform model that is expanding rapidly across the U.S.

The Beauty of Dual Language Schooling for All

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The beauty of dual language education is that both language groups benefit from the best circumstances for second language acquisition. These advantages include natural first and second language development, starting at a young age. The program typically begins in preschool or kindergarten and is grown grade by grade with each passing year, continuing throughout all grades pre-K–12.

Classes are usually team-taught by two teachers, one proficient in English and the other in the non-English language, with these teachers exchanging two classes. In regions with many academically proficient bilinguals, sometimes one bilingual teacher is hired to teach one class, using both languages for instruction in a carefully designed plan for equal instruction in each language.

Dual language students interact with same-age peers doing meaningful tasks together across all curricular subjects. This is not a separate, segregated program only for English learners—all students work together, teaching each other, benefiting from learning centers, small-group, and pair work in cooperative learning activities. The students proficient in Spanish (for example) are the “experts” during the instructional time

in Spanish, and the English-proficient students coteach their peers during the English instructional time.

Latino English Learners

The Thomas and Collier longitudinal research findings of the past 34 years, analyzing more than 7.5 million English learners' records in 36 school districts in 16 U.S. states, identify dual language education as the only school program that fully overcomes the underserving of Latinos and African American students. English learners have the largest distance to cover, starting with zero proficiency in English to reaching grade-level achievement in both first and second languages.

The stimulus for their robust achievement in English is the schoolwork in their home language. When English learners reach and then stay on grade-level achievement in their mother tongue, as they become increasingly academically proficient in English (their second language), they typically test above grade level in both languages after an average of six years of bilingual schooling.

Hundreds of research studies have shown that proficient bilinguals are cognitively advantaged over monolinguals. English learners in other program types typically do not succeed in reaching grade-level achievement in their second language, coming only halfway there or less by eighth grade, and many do not complete high school.

Practices used in the U.S. to educate these students in the first half of the 20th century included physically punishing students for speaking their native language and sending American Indian children to boarding school to replace their home language with English. Forcing linguistically diverse groups to lose their heritage language is referred to as subtractive bilingualism, leading to slowdown in cognitive development and poor achievement in school. Whereas research shows that additive bilinguals—adding a second language at no cost to their first language—do exceedingly well in school.

When English learners continue to develop cognitively in their first language until at least age 12, they achieve on or above grade level in school. Both native English speakers and Latinos attending dual language classes are becoming additive bilinguals, with full cognitive development in both languages. Over a six-year period, both groups reach grade level and then

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excel with scores above grade level on academic tests in both languages.

Latinos Proficient in English

This pattern of high academic achievement in dual language classes applies not only to Latinos who are not yet fluent in English (English learners) but also to Latinos who are bilingual or who have lost their heritage language. When they enroll in the dual language program, with time (an average of six years) the Latino students develop deep academic proficiency in both languages and significantly outscore their peers not in dual language classes.

These students are not eligible for transitional bilingual classes, an older bilingual program model designed only for English learners. In previous years, this was the only type of bilingual schooling available, and it was provided for a short two or three years, not enough time to develop proficient bilingualism. Now Latinos attending dual language classes for six to 12 years are achieving at high levels, outperforming students not in dual language, graduating at high rates (95%–99%), and continuing their schooling in four-year universities.

African American Students

The Thomas and Collier research findings also apply very dramatically to African American students, another group historically not well served by U.S. schools. Recent analyses of more than 3 million student records from the state of North Carolina over a three-year period found that by middle school, African American students of low income attending dual language classes were as much as two grades ahead of their peers not in dual language, a phenomenal achievement. In interviews, these students stated that they are proud to be in the program. They perceive it as a gifted curriculum, and they feel privileged, respected, and valued. Not only are they mastering a second language, but also their development of bilingualism influences their perceptions of their own community variety of English.

Dual language teachers affirm that their African American students develop greater metalinguistic awareness of the differences between their community variety of English and standard English, and they become more perceptive of the social nuances among dialectal variations at home, in the community, and at

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school. They come to value and celebrate regional variations of both the partner language (usually Spanish) and English. Some of their teachers reported that they acquired native-like pronunciation of Spanish at a faster pace than other students, and they attributed that to the African American students' "trilingualism"—their use of a home variety of English, standard English developed at school, and development of the non-English language.

This study and previous findings from large-scale, federally funded studies found that African American students also develop higher self-esteem in the dual language program as they examine cross-cultural differences and similarities in their curricular explorations. In the Spanish–English programs, they experience the wide variety of ethnic backgrounds of teachers and students from Latin America, and the ways in which diversity is experienced as well as celebrated in other countries. They see their world from a more global perspective, including the opportunities that await them as they mature into young adults. Dual language classes create a natural environment for greatly improved social, emotional, and cultural contexts for learning.

Students With Special Needs Attending Dual Language Classes

Many special educators and families question the advisability of placing students with special needs (such as learning disabilities, speech or hearing impairment, autism, Down syndrome) in dual language classes. However, in the large-scale North Carolina data analyses, special needs students who have chosen dual language greatly benefit and have scored much higher than their peers with similar special needs who are not attending dual language classes. This confirms the research findings of other researchers in Canada and the U.S. on special needs students. Examining large, longitudinal datasets of groups of students of varied ethnicities, socioeconomic status, levels of language proficiency, and special needs, almost all researchers have concluded that schooling through two languages does not harm any group of students, and often the benefits that all students receive are enormous.

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Classroom and Administrative Innovations

What educators experience when dual language classes are added to the curriculum influences teaching and administrative practices throughout the school. During the planning year, educators hire bilingual staff, make curricular decisions regarding instructional time and the subjects to be taught in each language, and determine literacy practices for each language. With each succeeding year of implementation, the next grade level is added, and the program expands to more classes as enrollment increases.

As more and more dual language classes are added, the teaching staff of the whole school share with each other the strategies that help their students excel during professional development training sessions and sometimes coteaching opportunities. This leads to an interesting outcome not anticipated from the principal interviews of the Thomas and Collier North Carolina research.

Dual language principals stated that the second language teaching strategies used with all dual language classes seem to assist all students, including those historically underserved, such as students of low-income background and African Americans and Latinos. All dual language classes are composed of very heterogeneous student groups, including varying students' proficiency level in the instructional language. With cooperative learning principles supporting the organization of classroom activities, dual language teachers and same-age peers provide lots of clues to meaning through mime, gestures, pictures, word charts, chants, music, art, movement, graphic organizers, and many more strategies. These extra clues to meaning help struggling students of all backgrounds catch on to what is going on, and they get excited and involved as they participate with their peers.

Peer teaching serves the important role of cognitive development through problem solving and critical thinking across the curriculum. Oral and literacy development through two languages, one of which is familiar and a comfort zone for half of the class, leads to "I get it!" in the second language and students begin to accelerate their learning as they assist each other with literacy development and process writing in each of the two languages.

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Administrative reforms may take place at many different levels as the dual language program matures. School leaders initially need to provide extra financial resources for curricular materials in the partner language, but because this is a mainstream program (not a separate, segregated program only for English learners), all curricular heads are jointly responsible for understanding the program and sharing resources and joint curricular decisions regarding textbooks in the partner language as well as in English.

The directors of world languages, ESOL/bilingual/dual language services, all subject area specialists, librarians, human resources, financial managers—every administrator in the school district must coordinate the funding and overall decisions for the program as part of mainstream instruction. A system for identifying qualified, certified, academically proficient bilingual teachers as well as plans for professional development for all teachers to improve their research-supported dual language teaching practices must also be in place.

Powerful Outcomes of Dual Language Classes

The two most powerful outcomes of dual language programs are higher cognitive development as measured by school tests and higher engagement with learning.

The two most powerful outcomes of dual language programs are higher cognitive development as measured by school tests and higher engagement with learning. Observers can readily see this student engagement when visiting dual language classes and seeing the students deeply involved with their curricular projects and teaching each other. Sometimes activities are complex, almost like walking into a high-level, interactive university course. The students support each other and come to respect and value diversity and multiple languages. They are preparing for the diverse workplaces and professions that they will experience as adults.

High school graduation rates are very high for dual language students. For example, the Omaha, Nebraska, dual language high school program, begun in 2001, serving many low-income students recently arrived from Mexico and Central America, has succeeded in graduating 100% of their dual language students, year after year, and many continue into university studies. The public schools of Woodburn, Oregon, a K–12 dual language school district with courses in Spanish–English and

Russian-English, have increased their English learner high school graduation rate from 41% in 2011 to 91% by 2016.

Another noteworthy development illustrates the increasing popularity of bilingualism in the U.S. Initiated in California in 2011, a Seal of Biliteracy has now been approved through state legislation in 37 U.S. states as of 2019. An additional 12 states are in the early stages of consideration of adoption of this Seal. When high school graduates pass tests to demonstrate academic proficiency in English and another language, the Seal of Biliteracy is added to their diploma. This recognition and award on their high school diploma assists them with university admission, scholarships, work credentials, and often higher pay.

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Looking Ahead

Every day, the world is changing through fast-paced, global interconnections. Dual language students are preparing for accelerating knowledge acquisition throughout their lives and for very diverse life experiences in the 21st century. Their deeply proficient bilingualism and biliteracy will serve them well. As inspired educators, we can prepare all of our students to learn and thrive in a global society.

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