

# Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches

## Excerpts from Chapter 6: Alternative Educational Programs for English Learners (pp. 323 and 328-335)

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Currently, several alternative school programs exist in California for educating English learners (ELs) that differ from English-only programs in the use of two languages (English and another language) for language, literacy, and academic instruction. These programs comprise (a) transitional bilingual, (b) developmental bilingual, and (c) two-way immersion. Those programs are the focus of this chapter. There is some discussion elsewhere in this publication on how English learners' home language is used in other program models, such as newcomer programs and sheltered instruction in the chapter by Echevarria and Short. We outline the rationale for and advantages of a dual language approach to education for English learners in California and across the country. The primary characteristics of those alternative programs are described. We go on to review research that has investigated the language, literacy, academic, and other outcomes of students who have participated in dual language programs.

### Program Characteristics

Each type of dual language program, including the primary goals, theoretical rationale, and intended student populations, is described in this section. For more detailed descriptions of these models, along with other dual language program models, see Genesee 1999. This information is also summarized in Table 6.1, along with information about grade levels served, appropriate teacher qualifications, the role of mainstream teachers, and the nature of instructional materials used in each type of program.

**Table 6.1. Summary of Alternative Educational Programs for English Learners**

<b>Components</b>	<b>Transitional Bilingual</b>	<b>Developmental Bilingual</b>	<b>Two Way immersion</b>
<b>Language Goals</b>	Transition to English only	Bilingualism	Bilingualism
<b>Cultural Goals</b>	Integrate into mainstream American culture	Integrate into mainstream American culture and maintain home/heritage culture	Maintain/integrate into mainstream American culture and appreciate other culture
<b>Academic Goals</b>	District goals and standards	District goals and standards	District goals and standards
<b>Student Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No/limited English</li> <li>• Same home language</li> <li>• Mixed cultural background</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No/limited English</li> <li>• Same home language</li> <li>• Mixed cultural background</li> </ul>	Both native speakers of English and students with no/limited English; different cultural backgrounds
<b>Grade Levels Served</b>	Primary and elementary	Elementary	K–8; preferably K–12
<b>Entry Levels</b>	K, 1, 2	K, 1, 2	K, 1
<b>Length of Student Participation</b>	2–4 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually 6 years (+K)</li> <li>• Preferably 12 years (+K)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually 6 years (+K)</li> <li>• Preferably 12 years (+K)</li> </ul>
<b>Role of Mainstream Teachers</b>	Mainstream teachers must have training in sheltered instruction.	Stand-alone program with its own specially trained teachers	Mainstream teachers with special training
<b>Teacher Qualifications</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bilingual certificate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bilingual-multicultural certificate</li> <li>• Bilingual proficiency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bilingual/immersion certification</li> <li>• Bilingual proficiency</li> <li>• Multicultural training</li> </ul>
<b>Instructional materials, texts, visual aids, etc.</b>	In the home language of students and in English; English materials adapted to language levels	In the home language of students and in English; English materials adapted to language levels	In the minority language and in English, as required by curriculum of study

### **Transitional Bilingual Education**

Transitional bilingual education (TBE), also sometimes referred to as early-exit bilingual education, has historically been a common form of dual language education for English learners in the United States (Genesee 1999). TBE provides academic instruction in English learners’ home language as they learn English. The typical TBE program begins in kindergarten or grade one and provides initial instruction in literacy and academic content areas through the student’s home language along with instruction in oral English and nonacademic subjects, such as art, music, and physical education. Teaching English learners in all-English classes as soon as they begin schooling, it is argued, impedes their academic development because they cannot speak or understand English sufficiently to benefit from academic instruction through English. Thus, learners are put at academic risk. TBE is designed to avoid this pitfall. As students acquire proficiency in oral English, the language in which academic subjects are taught gradually shifts from the students’ home language to English. Content instruction through English is often provided in individualized and specially designed units, often using sheltered instructional techniques (see Echevarria and Short, this publication). The transition to English instruction typically starts off with math, followed by reading and writing, then science, and finally social studies. Once they acquire sufficient English proficiency, TBE students make the transition to mainstream classes where all academic instruction is presented in English; often this occurs at grade three. In contrast to developmental bilingual education and two-way immersion programs, to be described shortly, TBE does not aim for full bilingualism. It uses the students’ home language to ensure grade-level mastery of academic content but only until such time as students

can make a full transition to all-English instruction, typically defined in California as one to two years (Genesee 1999).

The primary goals of TBE are to:

- Ensure mastery of grade-appropriate academic skills and knowledge.
- Facilitate and speed up the process of learning English.

Early instruction in students' home language serves both goals. The fact that instruction through the home language supports the acquisition of English sounds counterintuitive to some, but the rationale is as follows. First, teaching academic content to English learners through their home language, while they are learning to speak and comprehend English, helps them to acquire academic knowledge at the same pace as their native English-speaking counterparts because they are learning in a language they already know. Second, teaching English learners academic subjects initially in their home language also provides them with knowledge and experience that *facilitates* learning English in subsequent grade levels; for example, it is easier for English learners to understand and learn English language skills related to the study of planets if they already know something about planets. Third, the easiest language for students to learn to read and write first is the one they already know. Rather than delay reading and writing instruction until English learners can speak and comprehend English, reading and writing instruction can begin immediately if the students' home language is used.

Moreover, many literacy skills “transfer” from one language to another (August and Shanahan 2006; Genesee et al. 2006). Thus, if English learners learn to read and write reasonably well in their home language and learn to speak and comprehend English well, then it is relatively easy for them to learn to read and write in English. There is much evidence to support this approach (August and Shanahan 2006; Genesee et al. 2006), especially for languages that use the same script (e.g., Spanish and English). Fourth, it is argued that parents play a critical supporting role in their child's education. Teaching English learners in their home language increases the likelihood that their parents (who often speak little or no English) will be better able to support their children's academic development; for example, by reading with their children, supervising their homework, communicating with the teacher, and so on.

## **Developmental Bilingual Education**

Developmental bilingual education (DBE), also referred to as *maintenance bilingual education* and *late-exit bilingual education*, is an enrichment form of dual language education that uses English learners' home language and English for literacy and academic instruction throughout the elementary grade levels and, wherever possible, high school as well. In comparison to two-way immersion programs (discussed next) in which students from language-minority backgrounds are schooled along with students from the majority-language group using both groups' languages, DBE is a kind of one-way program that includes only or primarily language-minority students. Although DBE programs are intended to serve speakers of one minority language in the same classroom, diversity among students is not uncommon; a single class or program might include Hispanic students who were born and raised in the U.S. but speak virtually no English when they first enroll, Hispanic students who are already proficiently bilingual, and recent Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico who are just beginning to acquire English.

Most current DBE programs begin in kindergarten or grade one and add one grade level each year. They teach regular academic subjects through English and the students' native language for

as many grade levels as the school district can and will support, ideally until the end of high school. DBE programs are offered in a variety of minority languages, including Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Japanese, French, German, and Spanish. A listing of DBE programs is contained in the Center for Applied Linguistics Directory of Bilingual Programs. The vast majority of DBE programs include Spanish and English (Center for Applied Linguistics 2008).

DBE programs aim to promote high levels of academic achievement in all curricular areas and full proficiency in both the students' home language and English for academic purposes. They emphasize the cognitive and academic richness of exploring knowledge across academic domains from multiple cultural perspectives using both languages. DBE programs provide English learners with academic instruction in their home language as they learn English. Sheltered instructional techniques are the preferred method of delivering academic instruction (see Echevarria and Short, this publication). In this way, DBE aims for grade-level achievement in academic domains by the end of schooling. Indeed, well-implemented DBE leads to high academic achievement for English learners (Lindholm-Leary and Borsato 2006; Riches and Genesee 2006; Thomas and Collier 2002). DBE takes an enriched approach to educating English learners in that it promotes full proficiency in all aspects of the students' home language in addition to full proficiency in all aspects of English. As a result, it is viewed as an additive form of bilingual education (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan 2000).

The theoretical rationale for DBE is built on research in diverse domains, including linguistics, social sciences, and school effectiveness (e.g., Lindholm-Leary 2001). Accelerated learning, a concept from research on school effectiveness, is critical to understanding the learning situation of any group of potentially at-risk students. As a group, English learners generally score relatively low on tests related to all areas of the curriculum administered in English (cf. Abedi 2003). If they are to catch up to native English-speaking students who are advancing in achievement each year, they must make more academic progress per year than English-speaking students. Moreover, they must maintain such accelerated progress for several consecutive years in order to eventually close the achievement gap, which can be as much as 1.5 national standard deviation units. In a well-implemented DBE program, academic growth is accelerated through cognitively challenging academic work in the students' home language along with meaningful academic content taught through English. As students demonstrate that they have mastered grade-level curriculum material in their home language, they also close the achievement gap in English. With time (four to seven years), they are often able to demonstrate grade-level knowledge in English as well. DBE students in effective programs can outperform the average monolingual English-speaking group on standardized tests across the curriculum (Lindholm-Leary and Borsato 2006; Thomas and Collier 2002).

Research on language acquisition in school contexts also constitutes part of the theoretical base for DBE. It is widely believed that school programs that integrate second-language and content instruction are generally effective for promoting second-language proficiency (Genesee 1994) especially when accompanied by explicit and direct instruction of aspects of the second language that are difficult to acquire (Lyster 2007). Furthermore, developing students' home language so that it is commensurate with their cognitive development throughout the school years is crucial to academic success (Lindholm-Leary and Borsato 2006). Acquiring the second language in an additive context -- in which the first language is not lost but promoted -- leads to uninterrupted cognitive development and, thus, increased academic achievement (Lindholm-Leary and Borsato 2006).

## Two-Way Immersion Education

Two-way immersion programs (also known as *two-way bilingual education* and *dual language immersion*) have been widely implemented in schools and districts that seek to provide educational opportunities for all students to become bilingual (Center for Applied Linguistics 2008; Howard and Christian 2002). Two-way immersion programs provide integrated language and academic instruction for native speakers of English and native speakers of another language with the goals of high academic achievement, first- and second-language proficiency, and cross-cultural understanding. In two-way immersion programs, language learning is integrated with content instruction, as in the other program alternatives reviewed in this chapter. Academic subjects are taught to all students through both English and the other language, although the same subject is usually not taught in both languages in the same year. As students and teachers interact socially and work together to perform academic tasks, the students' language abilities are developed along with their knowledge of academic subject matter. Most programs start in kindergarten or first grade and continue until the end of elementary school or into middle and high school. Although there is much variation with certain program features, there are also some important core similarities among programs (Genesee 1999).

- There are usually approximately 50 percent English-only speakers and 50 percent native speakers of the other language (or no fewer than a third of either group).
- By including students from both language groups, two-way immersion programs give students the opportunity to be both first-language models and second-language learners.
- Academic instruction takes place through both languages, with the non-English language being used at least 50 percent of the time. There are two program alternatives, one (termed 50/50) in which both languages are used throughout the grades for 50 percent of the instructional day. In the other program alternative, called 90/10, the non-English language is used for 90 percent of the instructional day during kindergarten through grade one; after that, more English is added at each grade level until grade four or five, where the proportion is closer to 50/50.
- Two-way immersion creates an additive bilingual environment for all students since the primary languages of both groups of students are developed at the same time as their second languages are developed.

The rationale for two-way immersion is based on theories and research findings concerning both first- and second-language acquisition. First, and as already noted, bilingual education research indicates that academic knowledge and skills acquired through one language pave the way for acquisition of related knowledge and skills taught through the medium of another language. When instruction through the home language is provided to language-minority students along with balanced second-language support, those students attain higher levels of academic achievement and literacy in English than if they had been taught only in English (August and Shanahan 2006; Lindholm-Leary and Borsato 2006).

Second, research indicates that English is best acquired by language-minority students with limited or no proficiency in English after home-language skills are fully established. Specifically, strong oral and literacy skills developed in the home language provide a solid basis for the acquisition of literacy and other academic language skills in English (August and Shanahan 2006; Genesee et al. 2006). Moreover, common literacy-related skills that underlie the

acquisition and use of both languages transfer from the home language to the second language and, thereby, facilitate English language acquisition.

Third, immersion programs for language-majority students (those who are native speakers of English) enable them to develop advanced levels of proficiency in the second language without compromising their academic achievement or home language development (Genesee 2004).

Finally, many researchers and educators believe that language is learned best by all students when it is the medium of instruction rather than the exclusive focus of instruction (e.g., Lyster 2007). In two-way immersion settings, students learn language while exploring and learning academic content because there is a real need to communicate.

More generally, the rationale for two-way immersion grows out of sociocultural theory that maintains that learning occurs through social interaction (Lantolf 2005; Vygotsky 1978). More specifically, the integration of native speakers of English and native speakers of another language facilitates second-language acquisition since it promotes authentic, meaningful interaction with native speakers. Because the students in two-way immersion programs are all native speakers of one of the two second languages being promoted, it follows that native-language models are available in the classroom for both groups of second-language learners.

Social science research also provides a strong theoretical rationale for two-way immersion programs in culturally and linguistically diverse settings. Students who study in socioculturally supportive classrooms that build on the knowledge base they bring from their homes and communities are able to accelerate their own academic growth (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). The differential status enjoyed by language-minority and -majority students and particularly the low status of language-minority students can be transformed in a two-way immersion program where all students are respected and valued as equal partners in the learning process and where all are given access to the same resources as all other schools. Furthermore, in regions of the U.S. that provide economic rewards for graduates who are bilingual in English and another language, the economic advantages of bilingualism in the marketplace may serve to enhance the status and achievement of students who are bilingual.

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