

Parents' Questions about Dual Language Programs

Adapted from "The Two-Way Immersion Toolkit," Center for Applied Linguistics

1. What advantages are there for my child in a dual language program? Are the advantages the same for language minority and language majority students?

There are three major advantages for students of both language backgrounds, all tied to the goals of dual language education. The first advantage is that students develop full oral and reading and writing proficiency in two languages. This allows them to see their first language in a comparative perspective, which in turn helps them analyze and refine their language use.

A second advantage is that students not only achieve at levels that are similar to or higher than those of their peers enrolled in other programs on standardized tests of reading and math in English, but in addition they are able to read and write at grade level in another language. This in turn positively affects general academic performance. Research shows that there are fewer high school drop-outs from dual language programs than from other programs. Researchers also found that most dual language students expect to attend college. Thus, not only do dual language programs appear to improve academic performance but they may also enhance job opportunities in the future.

The third advantage is attitudinal: Students in dual language programs develop very positive attitudes about students of other language and cultural backgrounds, and positive attitudes toward themselves as learners. For example, researchers found that dual language students showed a great deal of diversity in the friendship choices that they made, and that the dual language educational experience produced students who became comfortable with speaking the second language and interacting with members of other ethnocultural groups. In a very real sense, students in dual language programs become more self-confident because they are better prepared to engage in a global society that values multiculturalism and bilingualism. One parent noted these benefits when she stated, "My child has the opportunity to be bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural. There are social and cognitive benefits to bilingualism. He gains a second language, a broader vocabulary, and multiple views of the world."

Overall, the advantages are the same for both native English speakers and English language learners, but the benefits may be stronger for English language learners, given that dual language education has been found to be the most successful model for helping these students succeed academically in school. Specific benefits for English language learners include an increased sense of pride and self-esteem. At school, they become the models of proficiency for students who learning their language. At home, they are able to communicate with family members, including grandparents and other members of the extended family.

2. How do students in dual language programs compare academically to students in other types of educational programs?

Several investigators have examined the reading and math achievement of students in dual language programs at late elementary or secondary levels to determine the long-term impact of dual language programs.

These studies showed that overall both English language learners and native English speakers made significant progress in both languages; both groups scored at or well above grade level in both languages by middle school; and both groups performed at comparable or superior levels compared to same-language peers in other educational settings. On norm-referenced standardized tests of reading and math achievement in English, native English speakers outscored their English-only peers in English-only classrooms. English language learners who had learned English in a dual language program scored significantly higher than their English language learning peers who had studies in other kinds of programs in the state and also performed on a par with native English speaking students in English-only classrooms.

3. When do students perform at grade level on standardized achievement tests in their first and second languages?

Native English speakers tend to perform at grade level in their first language once they have received formal reading instruction through that language, and their achievement is at grade level in the second language typically by third grade, if not sooner. For English language learners, scores are usually in the average range in their first language by second grade, but as a group they do not achieve at grade level in English until middle school.

4. Within dual language programs, how does the academic performance of native English speakers compare to that of English language learners?

Native English speakers typically achieve at higher levels in English than do English language learners. By middle school, native English speakers on average score above grade level in standardized achievement tests of reading and math, while English language learners on average approach grade level. However, students who begin elementary school as English language learners and develop full oral and reading and writing proficiencies in English often have a mean performance that is as high as or higher than that of native English speakers.

5. What are the characteristics of students who are successful in dual language programs?

From their personal and professional experiences, parents and educators note some common characteristics of successful dual language students. First, successful students tend to enjoy learning new things, and also like meeting and interacting with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Second, successful students tend to have parents who strongly support the program: Parents who truly understand and embrace dual language and its goals will transmit their positive attitudes to their children. Finally, successful students understand and embrace the philosophy of dual language education. They realize that learning in two languages can be challenging at times, especially for students from a monolingual background. The successful student perseveres and learns to take risks in speaking and writing the second language.

Research has shown that students from a variety of different backgrounds can be successful in dual language programs. Students from different ethnic, social class, and language backgrounds, and with varying academic strengths and needs, have all benefited from dual language education. There is no particular type of student that fails to flourish in dual language programs.

8. What can I do as a parent to get involved in my child's dual language classroom?

As in other education programs, strong home-school connections are essential to the success of dual language programs. There are many things that programs and parents can do to help foster these connections.

There are many things that parents can do to strengthen the home-school connection:

- Volunteer in the classroom.
- Share with students aspects of the home language and culture such as music, dance, literature, and foods.
- Attend parent education workshops on dual language programs.
- Participate in dual language family social gatherings.
- At dual language conferences and meetings, co-present with teachers, administrators, and students.
- Assist with ongoing recruitment for the program by sharing experiences with prospective parents and students.
- Contribute to the section of the school newsletter that deals with dual language issues.
- Serve as chaperons for program class trips, both domestic and international.
- Keep in touch with other dual language parents about program developments. For example, two volunteer parents (one representing each language background) can help get the word out to other parents about potential budget cuts or an important upcoming event. In some programs, parents have formed an electronic email list along with staff, and they use that forum to discuss all sorts of issues. Parents without home computers are able to use the school's computer lab to join in on the discussions that take place bilingually.
- Parents help each other with the translations.
- Support their children's language and literacy development in two languages, as well as their emerging cross-cultural appreciation. They can do this by exposing their children to books and movies in both languages; attending cultural festivals; and providing opportunities for authentic language exchanges.

9. How can I help support my child in doing homework in the second language, particularly if I don't know that language?

Parents can support students at home by making sure that they have the right environment and tools to get homework done (e.g., a quiet space and enough time, paper, dictionaries in both languages, writing utensils, and art supplies such as construction paper, paste, tape, and colored markers). Parents can also ask questions about the homework in the language spoken at home, thus giving the students opportunities to explain the assignment in their first language.

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