

Making Dual-Language Schools Work for English-Learners, Too



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Notwithstanding the United States' long history as a diverse, multilingual country, our national discourse around multilingualism, and who can learn what language, has rarely approached anything like coherence. This incoherence is the result of one of the central American paradoxes—the distance between our grandly stated principles of equity and our frequent failure to practice them—being brought to bear on the linguistic politics of U.S. schools. In a country that values cosmopolitan culture (particularly when it offers access to the global marketplace), multilingualism is clearly valuable and should be made available to U.S. students; but in a country anxious about the stability of its perceived Anglophone cultural core, it is critical that the primacy of English should never be questioned.

This double standard explains how the state of California could grow its number of bilingual schools during a twenty-year period during which the state had made it illegal to provide bilingual instruction to English-learning students (ELs). It's also why it often remains uncontroversial to offer English-dominant U.S. children opportunities to become multilingual—and yet controversial to offer ELs a chance to continue learning in their home languages at school. This dichotomy appears to start with language, but its roots are in matters of culture, race, and power. Insofar as bilingual education offers new opportunities and advantages to native English-speakers, our institutions tend to treat it as an exciting enhancement. By contrast, the country often treats multilingual opportunities for EL children as a dangerous recognition and celebration of languages other than English. Our institutions tend to resist this supposed challenge to Anglophone, and Anglo-cultural, dominance.

Obviously such a double standard in language learning is not a good fit for a multilingual and multicultural nation, or for our expressed goals of equity for all. Two-way dual language immersion (DLI) programs—which seek to eliminate linguistic double standards by design—provide a possible escape from this toxic status quo.

An Excellent Model—but Easily Corrupted by Gentrification

DLI programs offer academic instruction in two languages and enroll roughly equal proportions of native speakers of the two languages. As such, they establish English and the non-English partner language as peers of roughly equal importance. They also rely upon the native language abilities of all students, whether or not they speak English at home. That is, in a two-way, Spanish–English DLI program, the native Spanish-speaking students help the native English-speaking develop their Spanish, and vice versa.

When done right, DLI programs deliver linguistic (and potentially ethnic, socioeconomic, and/or racial) integration. They thereby provide EL students with the chance to learn English while continuing the development of their home languages while giving native English-speaking children much more exposure to a non-English language—something

approaching actual immersion in that language—than they would likely otherwise receive. While this program design does not automatically end all other equity conversations (e.g., Does the school equitably integrate students’ cultures into instruction? Does in-class linguistic integration lead to schoolwide social integration? etc.), it provides an encouraging starting point.

The trouble is, however, that ironic as it may seem, these programs’ popularity is threatening the model’s equitable, integrated balance. Many cities and communities—most recently Washington, D.C.—are finding that demand from English-dominant families is “Columbusing” and gentrifying DLI programs. In many cases, privileged, English-dominant families use hot housing markets, clever leveraging of lottery systems, and aggressive school district advocacy to ensure that their children gain access to these programs. Unsurprisingly, this reduces access for EL students.

Indeed, in D.C., the city is exploring opening additional DLI programs across the city while explicitly proposing to ignore the languages that children in prospective schools speak at home. This doesn’t only fly in the face of the field’s guidance on how to design and launch a high-quality DLI program: it also raises the alarming specter of expanding multilingual DLI programming for native English-speaking children while providing English-only instruction to native Spanish-speaking ELs at campuses across the city.

These trends play into the worst of American linguistic politics, where additional languages are made available to English-dominant students, but ELs are stuck in English-only schools.

Staying True to the Model

Correcting the effects of gentrification on DLI programs is a complicated task, but an important one. It’s important most of all because of how much it benefits EL children, who uniquely benefit from these programs. Meta-analyses of studies on bilingual education find that it is particularly effective for ELs in the earliest grades. Research also finds that EL children in two-way DLI programs are more likely to reach full English proficiency and succeed academically. As one methodologically rigorous recent study of DLI programs in Portland (Oregon) Public Schools noted, “studies that have specifically compared ELs attending dual-language immersion to those attending monolingual English or transitional bilingual programs have generally found outperformance among students in dual-language immersion.”

Studies have not yet determined precisely why this might be, but many of the leading hypotheses hint at the importance of key aspects of the two-way DLI model. Some researchers theorize that these programs work for ELs because they allow students to more fully develop their native languages, which helps them build a fuller understanding of how to acquire and use language in general. This sophisticated understanding of language in general, in turn, helps them to

master English. Amplified fluency in one language, evidence suggests, supports fluency in others, as well. Meanwhile, since DLI programs offer academic content instruction in ELs' native languages, this may help them stay academically on track even as they advance through the early stages of English proficiency.

Other researchers suggest that these programs also work well because they benefit from linguistic integration. They treat all children's native language skills as assets. That is, ELs' usage of their native languages increases English-dominant children's exposure to Spanish (or Mandarin, or French, etc.). Native Spanish-speakers can model Spanish usage for the native English-speakers, just as the native English-speakers can model English usage for native Spanish-speakers.

Ironically, in other words, the displacement of ELs from these programs may undermine the pedagogical effectiveness of DLI programs for English-dominant children. If most, or even all, of the students in a DLI program are native, and monolingual, English-speakers, they have to count on upon the Spanish (or Mandarin, or French, or Vietnamese, etc.) language skills of their teacher(s) to learn the language. In these classrooms, students customarily default to their dominant language—English—for engagements with one another. This does not create a meaningful language immersion experience.

Fortunately, equity-minded education leaders interested in expanding multilingual programming have a range of options (which I've explored in two recent commentaries) for ensuring that new dual language immersion programs support integration and linguistic equity. Some are making that proactive choice. Yesterday, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the opening of nearly four dozen new DLI preschool programs, which will be "comprised of 50 percent children whose home language is the target language of the program and 50 percent English-proficient students." Similarly, in San Antonio, Texas, education reformers are using the linguistic integration of new dual language immersion programs as part of a broader integration push.

These aren't always easy moves for policymakers. Privileged English-dominant families may complain that their children's chances of enrolling in DLI programs will be reduced by efforts to locate programs in linguistically-diverse communities and/or reserve seats for EL students. It is particularly difficult to change DLI access rules after these programs have been established, since that may frustrate DLI-interested families who have adjusted their choices and expectations to try to enroll. As such, it's all the more reason for education leaders to lead with equity from the outset. Linguistically integrated DLI programs aren't just good pedagogy and policy: if they're designed that way from the start, they can also be good politics.



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