

Dual Language Program

Questions and Answers: What does research say?

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 two-way immersion education (e.g., [Howard & Christian, 2002](#)). 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 ([Cazabon, Lambert, & Heise-Baigorria, 2002](#)).

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 ([Lindholm-Leary, 2001](#); [Thomas & Collier, 2002](#)) shows that there are fewer high school drop-outs from dual language programs than from other programs. Lindholm-Leary ([2003](#)) 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, Cazabon, Lambert, & Heise-Baigorria ([2002](#)) 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 two-way immersion education has been found to be the most successful model for helping these students succeed academically in school ([Lindholm-Leary, 2001](#); [Thomas & Collier, 2002](#)). 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 (e.g., [Cazabon, Nicoladis, & Lambert, 1998](#); [Collier & Thomas, 2004](#); [Howard, Sugarman & Christian, 2003](#); [Kirk-Senesac, 2002](#); Lindholm-Leary, [2001](#), [2005](#)).

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 studied in other kinds of programs in the state and also performed on a par with native English speaking students in English-only classrooms ([Lindholm-Leary, 2005](#); [Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, in press](#)).

3. When do students perform at grade level on standardized achievement tests in their first and second languages? Is the time frame different for 90/10 vs. 50/50 models?

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.

Comparing the achievement of students in 90/10 and 50/50 models, Lindholm-Leary ([2001](#)) found that by Grades 7-8, English language learners and native-English-speaking students scored similarly to their peers of the same language and economic backgrounds on achievement tests in English. When achievement was measured in Spanish, students in 90/10 programs scored higher than students in 50/50 programs. Thus, more instructional time spent in Spanish positively affected achievement in Spanish and had no negative effect on achievement measured in English.

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 ([Howard, Sugarman & Christian, 2003](#)). 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 ([Howard, Sugarman, & Christian, 2003](#)). 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.

6. How can DUAL LANGUAGE program parents help families who don't have children in the program understand its benefits?

There are many things that program parents can do to help other parents learn about dual language education. For example, they can form a PTA subgroup that responds to queries from interested parents. They can organize a Parent-to-Parent Information Day and be accessible to prospective parents for questions about the program. On these occasions, they can talk about how their children are doing at school and show examples of written work in both languages. A personal testimony describing how the program has helped a particular child is often the best evidence of program success.

At [Amigos](#), a 50/50 program in Cambridge, MA, program parents invite their friends outside of the program to celebrations and activities in the evenings and on weekends. Seeing families speaking and having a good time in two languages encourages others to join in the fun and experience for themselves the rich rewards of two-way immersion education.

Guided tours conducted by program parents for other parents during the school day are also a good way to help people understand DUAL LANGUAGE. During these tours, parents should be invited to visit classes, including a lower grade—perhaps a kindergarten class—and an upper grade, so they can see firsthand the progress that children make when they remain in the program. The Amigos program suggests that touring parents take time to speak with the students, who can articulate what it means to be schooled in two languages, and to examine students' written work and projects. Program parents can encourage the school to keep on hand a few portfolios of former students who have gone through the program so that parents can see how students progress over time.

7. How can DUAL LANGUAGE parents work with the school board and district administrators to help them understand the importance of supporting DUAL LANGUAGE programs?

There are many things that parents can do to help the school board and administrators understand the benefits of two-way immersion education.

First, parents should do everything they can to make the program a success, and then they should publicly report the program's successes. Administrators and school board members are most likely to support an effective program that has accumulated solid evidence of promoting academic achievement among the student population. Thus, important first steps in generating support for DUAL LANGUAGE programs include working with the program to help build its quality so that it produces good results for students; monitoring students' language, literacy, and academic progress; making improvements to the program as needed; and publicly reporting successes.

Parents can help the board and administrators better understand DUAL LANGUAGE by speaking up for the program as they participate in school and school district activities. For example, they can join the advisory committees that school boards and districts set up for parent and community input, such as those dealing with curriculum and instruction, foreign language, and ESL. When budget issues arise, parents can offer testimonials about the value of the dual language program and have their children do so, too, at public board meetings. In addition, small coalitions of parents that include native speakers of both program languages can make appointments to talk with district administrators about what the program has meant to them as parents. Writing letters to the editor of a local paper is a way to provide information about the program to the community at large.

Administrators and school board members can be invited to visit the program, and parents can accompany them to guide the visit and highlight noteworthy features. Seeing is believing: Many people do not become convinced of the

benefits of dual language programs until they can actually see the program at work. PTAs should be sure to invite board members to program events, such as plays, concerts, and other activities that showcase both languages.

Finally, parents can support the work of administrators and school board members who already appreciate the value of the program and help them influence their less enthusiastic peers. Input from peers is often the most compelling input of all. Friends of two-way immersion should be informed regularly about program activities and student achievement.

8. What should a DUAL LANGUAGE program do to promote home-school connections? What can I do as a parent to get involved?

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.

First of all, programs can promote positive home-school connections by ensuring that all communications with parents, oral and in writing, are in both languages of instruction. This accomplishes the dual goals of ensuring clear communications with parents and promoting the goals of the program.

Programs can also sponsor periodic meetings to educate parents on DUAL LANGUAGE related topics such as program design, language acquisition, helping with homework, biliteracy development, and assessment practices. In addition, programs may offer ESL classes for parents of English language learners and classes in the partner language (e.g., Spanish) for parents of native English speakers. Ideally, these language classes should be structured to bring the two groups together on a regular basis in order to allow parents to practice the second language with native speakers.

Finally, programs can foster good home-school connections by recognizing the skills and strengths that families bring to the school and by seeing them as valuable resources that provide critical information about their children. DUAL LANGUAGE teachers and administrators can visit students' homes and communities, in order to develop firsthand knowledge of students' funds of knowledge ([Moll, 1992a, 1992b](#)).

There are many things that parents can do to strengthen the home-school connection. Calderón and Minaya-Rowe ([2003](#)) provide a detailed list:

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? What kind of homework support can the program provide?

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.

The program can also provide homework support. One of the best supports is ongoing communication between the teacher and the parents through a weekly newsletter in both languages. In the newsletter, the teacher can describe the topics that are being taught and provide an overview of homework assignments for the week, along with written guidance for complicated assignments (and perhaps some models of completed assignments). Teachers can also set up a class buddy system, matching an English-speaking student with a student speaking the other program language to help one another with homework. Yet another way that the program can provide homework support is by running an after-school homework club where students can receive support on long-term projects or on a daily basis.

Finally, the program can organize a homework hotline or a group of parent volunteers to provide homework support in one language or another, by telephone or email. Alternately, the teacher or parent volunteers could tape-record the homework each day along with helpful suggestions for completing it.

10. What resources exist for parents of DUAL LANGUAGE students? Are there conferences that I might enjoy attending?

There are many resources for parents on two-way immersion education. There are also conferences that provide opportunities for parents to network with DUAL LANGUAGE educators and other DUAL LANGUAGE parents. Resources include books (see the [annotated bibliography](#)) and videos from organizations and from other DUAL LANGUAGE programs. Dual language videos are available through the [Center for Applied Linguistics](#) (CAL). There are also online directories of dual language programs. CAL has an online [directory of DUAL LANGUAGE programs](#) in the United States, the California Department of Education has a directory of all the [two-way bilingual immersion programs in California](#), and the [Texas Two-Way](#)/Dual Language Consortium has an online directory of programs in that state.

Following is a partial list of organizations with a special interest in dual language education: The [Center for Applied Linguistics](#) (CAL), the [National Association for Bilingual Education](#) (NABE), [2-Way CABE](#) (California Association for Bilingual Education), [Dual Language Education of New Mexico](#), and the [Illinois Resource Center](#).

Some of these organizations host conferences that look at dual language programs, and this information is provided on their websites. The OELA Newsline of the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition also has a section for parents of bilingual children (to subscribe, go to <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/enews/subscribe.htm>)