

Educational Leadership

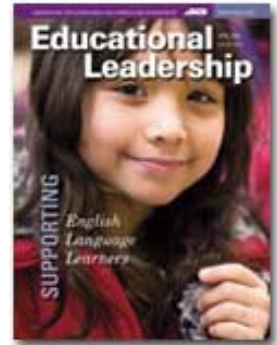
April 2009 | Volume 66 | Number 7

Supporting English Language Learners Pages 54-58

Let's Make Dual Language the Norm

Bilingual programs that focus on both English and Spanish keep Latino ELLs bilingual and achieving on grade level.

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April 2009

Carlos Gutierrez,¹ a first-generation American whose family emigrated from Mexico, attends 2nd grade in a large urban district in Texas. Like many elementary students around the United States, Carlos lives in poverty. His mother stays home during the day caring for his siblings and cooks part-time at a neighborhood restaurant. Carlos's father works as a carpenter on an "as needed" basis. Last year, Mr. and Mrs. Gutierrez, who have limited formal schooling and speak little English, earned a combined income of \$17,690 for their family of five.

When Carlos started school, he was identified as limited English proficient. At school, however, Carlos speaks, listens, reads, and writes in both English and Spanish every day. His school offers a dual language bilingual education program that serves both English-dominant and Spanish-dominant speakers. Mathematics has always been taught in English, social studies and science have consistently been taught in Spanish, and language arts has been taught in both English and Spanish. Carlos and his classmates are becoming bilingual and biliterate. When we asked Carlos what he wants to be when he grows up, he replied, "I want to be an architect so I can design tall buildings, and my father will help me build them."

As the United States continues to become more culturally diverse, students like Carlos are one of the fastest growing groups in the public schools. In 2006, about 20 percent of children ages 5–17 spoke a language other than English at home, and 5 percent spoke English with difficulty (Planty et al., 2008). According to the 1999 report *Latinos in Education*, Latinos make up 75 percent of all students in bilingual, English as a second language, and other English support programs (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008).

However, with states like California, Arizona, and Massachusetts virtually eliminating bilingual education (Crawford, 2004), most English language learners (ELLs) in the United States are not as lucky as Carlos. Most are enrolled in mainstream classrooms with general education teachers who are not prepared to teach learners from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

With ELLs typically placed with teachers who don't know how to raise their academic achievement, it should come as no surprise that these students are at risk of dropping out (Crawford, 2004). But Carlos is one of a growing population of English language learners in Texas who are being schooled through a dual language program. Research shows that dual language programs are an effective way to meet the needs of Latino ELLs and close the achievement gap (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

As consultants with expertise in bilingual education, we help schools throughout Texas implement enrichment bilingual education programs. We have observed that dual language models in which students perform academic work daily in both English and Spanish are the most effective way to educate Latino ELLs. We believe it's crucial that schools all over the United States, particularly those serving Latino students, go dual language.

Misconceptions About ELLs

Several prevalent misconceptions about ELLs and the language acquisition process may dissuade teachers from trying a dual language approach. We have found that teachers with little knowledge about how to teach English learners commonly hold the following misconceptions, each of which runs counter to informed observations and research.

Misconception 1. The most effective way to ensure that students learn English is to immerse them in English. Studies show, however, that the most effective way to ensure that ELLs learn *academic* English well enough for school success is to teach them in both languages. When language learners learn grade-level academic content and skills in their first language throughout their instructional program, they can solidly transfer that knowledge to academic work in their second language. Research shows that ELLs in dual language programs, as a group, not only closed the achievement gap in terms of standardized test scores, but also surpassed native English speakers in academic achievement (Gómez, 2006; Gómez, Freeman, & Freeman, 2005).

Misconception 2. Through immersion, ELLs will learn enough English within a year to survive academically. ELLs need five to seven years to master English well enough to work as proficiently in English as they could in their native language. Educators often mistakenly assume that English learners can learn academic content on grade level because these students can converse in English. There are two types of language proficiency, however: (1) basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), which includes basic commands, social conversations, and fluency, and (2) cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). Acquiring BICS takes two to three years and is insufficient for learning academic content; for such learning, students must achieve CALP, which includes content-based literacy skills and more sophisticated language use. Most ELLs need five to seven years to reach CALP in their second language, and they must continue CALP development in their first language to stay on grade level (Cummins, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Misconception 3. Once ELLs have achieved oral fluency in English, they are capable of academic learning in mainstream English-only classrooms. Achieving oral fluency in English is only the first step to gaining cognitive and academic content proficiency in a second language. The

ability to understand and engage in conversational English is not indicative of CALP. Grade-level CALP is achieved through a student's first language.

Misconception 4. The less ELLs use their first language, the better. In fact the opposite is true: The more ELLs use their native language in school, building as many skills as they can in that language, the better (Cummins, 1991, 2008; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

The Prevalent Approach: Transitional Education

Dual language approaches that involve significant academic instruction in both languages represent "additive/enrichment" models of bilingual education. Rather than emphasizing teaching English at the expense of the native language, they promote full conversational and academic proficiency in both languages. Unfortunately, transitional bilingual programs, the most prevalent type of bilingual education in U.S. schools, follow a "subtractive/remedial" model. Such programs reflect the misconceptions discussed above and "subtract" language learners' skills in their native language.

The main goal of transitional bilingual education programs is for students to develop linguistic and academic proficiency in English as quickly as possible through immersion. Teachers teach everything in English through sheltered instruction; ELLs are expected to use their second language to both communicate and learn (Lindholm-Leary, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

When students cannot perform academically because they lack English proficiency, teachers tend to water down the curriculum or translate content information simplistically. Well-meaning teachers think, "Let me make it easier for this student." This practice works against ELLs as they don't learn to read or learn academic content at grade level.

Transitional programs seem to be grounded in the belief that English learners are language deficient because they are not native English speakers. Such programs produce "bilingual illiterates"—students who are not literate in either their native or their adopted language. Many progress through the grades, drill for high-stakes state-mandated tests in English, and graduate with a high school diploma. Too many others, however, believe they are incapable of succeeding academically, conclude that school is not for them, and drop out. An approach that better supports the academic potential of ELLs, particularly Latino students, is clearly needed.

The Approach English Language Learners Need

In the past 10 years, many language experts have begun to advocate dual language programs, and interest in them has resurfaced. Advocates of such models advance the principle that continued development of both languages enhances students' educational and cognitive development. They also believe that literacy-based abilities are interdependent across languages in such a way that knowledge and skills acquired in one language are potentially available in the other.

In dual language programs, ELLs do not wait until they are proficient in conversational and academic English before mastering academic content. Instead, they receive support to learn English and at the same time keep up with grade-level content in their native language. In "50-50" bilingual models, students work in each language about half the time throughout their

instructional program.

Time for the two languages may be divided up in various ways—such as half a day of instruction in one language and half a day in the other. Some students work in one language for certain content areas and in the other language for the remaining areas, like Carlos, the student profiled earlier. English language learners in dual language instruction should learn to read and write in their native or dominant language first, since they have fully developed BICS in that language. With these models, teachers do not feel compelled to water down the curriculum. On the contrary, they view students who come to school with a language other than English as having assets rather than deficits.

In our work with schools around Texas, we frequently implement a dual language education model that Leo Gómez and Richard Gómez developed in the 1990s. This model is designed for mixed groups of elementary-age English-dominant and Spanish-dominant speakers, and a central component of it is bilingual pairs and groups. Each content area is taught in only one language (except language arts, which is taught in both). For all students, mathematics is taught in English only; science and social studies are in Spanish only. The language for other activities alternates daily, and students work in each language an equal amount of time.

Currently, 366 schools around Texas have adopted the Gómez and Gómez model. A study in one school district (Gómez, 2006) found that students who studied under this model for at least three years achieved at high levels of academic proficiency, as measured by statewide assessments. For example, 94 percent of 5th graders who studied with dual language enrichment met the reading standard on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, compared with 73 percent of all 5th graders in the district. Fifth graders' results in mathematics, as well as results for middle schoolers, showed similar patterns.

The Gómez and Gómez model has been described in greater depth elsewhere (see Gómez, 2000, 2006; Gómez, Freeman, & Freeman, 2005), but we share here a few trends we've noticed, especially in terms of how struggling ELLs' attitudes change once this model is put in place and how teachers' ideas about English language learners move from misconceptions to a realistic sense of what students require.

Teachers report that after they have used this model even for a short time, their ELLs show markedly higher levels of motivation and enthusiasm. Students who were once silent, shy, and confused are transformed into active, vocal learners who assist English-dominant peers through teacher-directed bilingual pairing and cooperative-learning activities. Teachers come to realize that English language learners go through the same linguistic and cognitive developmental processes as native English speakers, and this insight helps teachers see the necessity of developing literacy in the first language.

Native English speakers benefit equally from this dual language program. As they become linguistically and academically strong in English, they transfer those skills to conversational and academic Spanish. In addition, assessments in mathematics, reading, and writing generally have indicated that when schools use dual language enrichment models, both English- and Spanish-dominant students meet or exceed proficiency standards. From 1996 to 2001, Thomas

and Collier (2002) studied dual language enrichment programs in five sites across the United States. They found that ELLs schooled in well-implemented dual language programs had greater long-term academic and linguistic success in English than did their native English-speaking peers educated in monolingual English programs.

Let's View Language as an Asset

Although most teachers strive to teach all their students, most are unprepared to meet the challenge of educating ELLs, largely because they have taught for years within subtractive/remedial environments. How much better it would be if teachers viewed languages other than English as an empowering resource for bringing all students biliteracy and bilingualism, providing both ELLs and English-dominant students an advantage in a high-tech, global society. There is something wrong when kids like Carlos have to be *lucky* to be enrolled in a dual language program. Let's make such programs the rule.

Endnote

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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