Dual Language Program: Deal or No Deal?

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Abstract

Our country has an increasing need for bilingual graduates in the workplace. In addition to this, educators in many borderland states are finding a need to have strategies for instructing a continually increasing number of Spanish speaking children. One of the best ways to create full bilinguals is through a model of bilingual education called “Dual Language.” This consists of structured instruction delivered in two languages. In Dual Language programs, both Spanish and English native speakers can attain bilingualism. Teachers need effective strategies recommended by practitioners in Dual Language programs that have produced academically successful bilingual students. This investigation examines and identifies several common practices observed in effective dual language classrooms across four states in a structured format from a triangulated perspective. In order to implement effective dual language programs there must be a commitment to ensuring that certain components of effective programs are included in program implementation. This study highlights these components of effective dual language programs as observed in three U.S. borderland states. Are school districts willing to commit to excellence in second language development- deal or no deal?

Dual language bilingual program development has been prompted by the need to prepare our children to navigate in an increasingly global society (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan 2000). This enriched model for educating children learning a second language would be beneficial for immigrant children in our borderlands. By providing a certain amount of instruction in each language in an isolated way, English speakers and Spanish speakers both benefit. Speakers of different languages benefit as their peers, teacher and school come to expect and even appreciate differences among students. Students who are minority language speakers are seen as desirable and often actively recruited as educators plan and instruct in dual language programs (Montague 1998). The view of a bilingual child with a locally relevant language shifts from a “compensatory and deficit model” to a “gifted and talented” orientation. Garcia and Jensen (2006) noted that there are three major goals for students in dual language programs:

1. To help children to learn English and find success in U. S. schools;
2. To help these children become competent in their own language without sacrificing success in school; and
3. To promote linguistic and ethnic equity among the children encouraging children to bridge the gaps between cultures and languages.” (p. 32)
In many schools, this means that minority language speakers are now finding validation, excitement and enthusiasm over their presence in classrooms. As a result, their school performance oftentimes increases (Thomas & Collier 1997).

Dual Language bilingual programs operate with the objective of producing communicative and literate children who can negotiate between two languages in their daily interactions (Cloud, Genesee, and Hamayan 2000). The Center for Applied Linguistics in 2006 reported that there were 329 dual language programs in 29 states plus the District of Columbia. These are schools involved in this dynamic form of education centered on children, tapping into one of our nations’ greatest resources: language difference.

**Rationale for the Study**

One of the primary goals of bilingual education is for students to learn English (Krashen 1996). According to cognitive research and theory in language acquisition, the best way for minority students to learn English is for them to master their first language first. In this way, they can gain access to the high level of proficiency needed for upper-intermediate and secondary instruction. While second language learners are still learning the language of school instruction, content delivery should ideally be available to them in the native language so that they don’t fall behind in the subject areas while learning English. In addition, knowledge is transferred across languages in the brain rather than constructed initially in the weakest language (Krashen and Biber 1988; Krashen 1996; Willig 1985). In other words, concepts such as reading are learned once and transferred across languages at the cognitive level. When provided with quality bilingual education, the conceptual base developed through the medium of a child’s first language facilitates later learning in English. This occurs so that children who come to school with a home language background other than English are able to attain similar access to education as their English speaking peers (Krashen 1996; Beykont 1994).

Regardless of delivery model, the cognitive advantages of bilingualism are immeasurable (Grosjean 1982). The validation of one’s home culture and language is absolutely essential to learning if we expect our children to move beyond the survival levels of basic needs in school (Maslow 1954). However, the quality of the program being delivered is a definitive tool in facilitating optimal student performance in school.

Dual language programs are committed to providing students with an enriched education program in two languages. Part of the educational requirements of No Child Left Behind is Annual Yearly Progress based on state criterion referenced tests or standardized tests. Many dual language programs are found in schools with low socioeconomic status, those in which 80-95% of the students qualify for free and/or reduced lunch, and those with high percentages of students qualifying as English language learners actually credit the implementation of their dual language programs with helping to achieve Annual Yearly Progress (Kriterman 2006). With the emphasis on high academic achievement in two languages, dual language education acknowledges and encourages the knowledge and skills the students bring to the classroom by building on prior knowledge and experiences. Two-way bilingual programs, or dual language, provide reading instruction in the native language and in English both to English language learners and to English speakers (Calderón and Minaya-Rowe 2003; Howard, Sugarman, and Christian 2003). The programs try to enroll half language minority students and half native English speaking students in each classroom, thus promoting cross cultural awareness (Garcia and Jensen 2006). The instructional strategies used by dual language teachers take advantage of both the majority and
minority language speakers serving as the language models throughout the school day. Students feel empowered and capable of meeting the teacher’s high academic expectations (Kriteman 2006).

Definition of Terms

The programs included here demonstrated consistent application of the four features identified by Lindholm (2000) as defining quality Dual Language or “bilingual immersion” programs. These four features include:

(1)“…Instruction through two languages, where the target language is used for a significant portion of the students’ instructional day…”
(2)“…periods of instruction during which only one language is used…”
(3)“…native English speakers and native speakers of the target language are participants.”
(4)“…students are integrated for most content…” (p. 13)

As employed in this study, the label of “Dual Language” applies to such programs that provide equity in access to language rather than all bilingual programs (Leslow-Hurley 2000). For the purposes of this discussion, “Dual Language” refers to both the 90/10 and the 50/50 model of bilingual education. Some of the programs studied here include each language for half of time spent in school for each grade level, or a “50/50” model. Others use the “90/10” model. These programs provided instruction through the minority language, Spanish, for 90% of the day for all kindergarteners with English constituting 10% of all kindergarten instruction. In the first grade English was increased to 20% of the day, until an equal time split of 50% for each language is achieved by the third or fourth grade year in the program.

All of the programs described in this study included language minority and language majority students in the program. These programs have been referred to as “two-way” programs in the literature (Freeman 1998; Lindholm 1999; Thomas and Collier, 1997). Both 90/10 and 50/50 models of Dual Language programs as used in a “two-way” format with balanced populations have been compared in previous studies (Christian and Whitcher 1995; Freeman 1998; Lindholm 1987; Torres-Guzmán 2002; Valdés 1997). This study, however, strives to identify and group common practices and strategies used by practitioners, parents and administrators implementing Dual Language instruction in schools where the students have demonstrated academic success through a comparison of test scores. In most cases, state mandated standardized tests were used as a measure of academic success in English across populations with each school site electing different formal and informal methods to measure academic success in Spanish.

Introduction

Seven components from a practitioner’s perspective that become critical for success in applied Dual Language programs are used here for the purpose of categorizing the practices observed in this study (Montague 1999). These critical components include the following:

(1)Definition of the Model
(2)Gradual Phase-In
(3)Population to be Served
(4)Materials
(5)Training
(6)Administrative Support
(7)Elicited Response of the Second Language
Most of the schools in this study addressed these critical components at various levels, through different practices. For the purposes of this discussion, common strategies and practices are grouped according these seven critical components.

**Methods**

This study examined dual language programs to identify common teaching practices and strategies in Dual Language classrooms of effective programs. For the purposes of this discussion, a school with a Dual Language program was determined to be effective according to the following criteria:

1. The school serves a diverse population with a general balance of native language speakers represented in Dual Language classrooms.
2. Test scores from the school were reviewed. Several states provide a special label that indicates high test-scores on a school-wide basis have been attained. For the schools located in these states, the criteria of “excellent,” or “highly recognized,” had to be met. For states where schools are not labeled in such a manner, another definition signifying high scores school-wide had to be attained.
3. The last criteria for inclusion here was that the school and district were prepared to cooperate with the nature of the research required for this study.

Through the use of these three criteria, six school districts in four different states were chosen. The states included New Mexico, California, Texas, and Virginia. Three of the four schools were located in borderland states. Though each school district agreed to participate, complete anonymity of the school has been preserved. Triangulation was achieved through collecting data in the following ways. First, surveys were obtained from each teacher whose Dual Language class was included in this study. Second, each school was visited and the researchers had an opportunity to observe teachers at work with children in their classrooms. Lastly, interviews were conducted with parents, teachers, school administrator(s) and in some cases, the district officials who oversaw the programs.

As each classroom was visited and interviews occurred, practices that were common among classrooms began to emerge. Many of these practices have been reflected in previous studies in the professional literature, though some were original to each teacher’s personal style of teaching. Many classroom practices and program characteristics became evident through the interviews and in some of the surveys. Additionally, the surveys served as an anonymous place for teachers to detail their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of their particular program. Data from the classroom observations, interviews, and surveys was compiled using the SPSS data analysis program. Conclusions were drawn based on trends indicated in the data.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was three-fold for this study. Interview questions addressed program implementation, initiation and success. All teachers at each dual language school site were interviewed. Each participant who was interviewed was encouraged to be candid and respond in detail. Surveys were submitted to participating teachers and collected on site or through the mail after the researchers left the site. All survey responses have been tallied and compared to establish commonalities and differences between groups at each school site. Both researchers observed in about 90% of the classrooms at every school, and made notation of practices observed. Notes from researcher observations and interview notes were analyzed and have been compared and trends noted are included here.
Findings

As stated previously, for purposes of organization and discussion, common practices have been grouped here through comparison with the established critical components of quality Dual Language programs as described by Montague (1999).

Definition of the Model

When all participants define and agree upon the model to be implemented, whether 50/50 or 90/10, the program attains a certain level of endorsement by all and therefore is assured increased opportunity for success. This agreement provides for realistic expectations in addition to facilitating a common standard for all to connect with the program. This is as important for teachers outside of the program as it is for those implementing it. Additionally, parents and other community members need to be invested in the model for the program to achieve long-term success.

Most of the schools in this study established an agreed-upon model that varied from school-to-school. The most common practice seen in this study was for the initiators of the program, whether they were teachers or administrators, to become well read in the current research and share the information with other participants. In some cases, this meant teachers sharing with administrators or vice versa. All schools in this study used various practices to share the information with parents. Some schools invited parents to learn about the program by volunteering in the classes, others held parent classes at the school, one school held community meetings for the purpose of sharing research and other program information with parents. Once administrators were able to support teachers and educate community members, teachers had more time to polish and plan for instruction rather than keeping parents abreast of the research and justifying the program.

The most common practice used by administrators in this area included facilitating teacher training before initiating the program in that particular teacher’s class. For the schools that used a gradual phase-in of the program, this was accomplished smoothly. Some schools wrote grants for funding of teacher training, other schools hosted research discussion for teacher-to-teacher training to occur, two schools were fortunate enough to have district training available. For most schools, agreement upon the model to be used was valued by the administrator and then reinforced through hiring practices as well as with school-to-parent relationships. For all of the schools that implemented an agreed-upon model, practices such as regular community meetings, parent inclusion in the program through strategies discussed later in this section, and regular teacher training were common. One administrator also made a consistent effort to raise awareness of the model used at her school with district officials.

Gradual Phase-In

A gradual phasing-in of the program leads to long-term success by preserving a balanced student population in addition to facilitating teacher and administrator success and a growth in parent awareness of the program as it grows each year to include a new grade. Most administrators in this study learned the research and implemented their program with a gradual phase-in. According to interviews with teachers and the parent community, administrators were able to preserve the integrity of the program by implementing a gradual phase-in in spite of sometimes over-enthusiastic parents and teachers. In one case, the school implemented the program across grades prematurely and discussed regret over this decision during the interviews. At the time of our visit, the school faculty was planning to further study the challenges posed by this implementation during the upcoming summer break.
The most common practice seen by all of the administrators interviewed was to keep open communication between teachers and the parent community so that gradual phasing-in of the program could occur and unrealistic expectations did not hamper success of the program.

**Population to be Served**

Instruction reflecting the population represented is imperative to prevent teacher burn-out and facilitate success for children as various language models are available on a peer basis. Without access to peer language models, unnecessary linguistic responsibility can fall upon the teacher. Over time, this affects the quality of the program (Montague, 1988). For optimal success, each language must be equally represented in each classroom. Children work best when they have access to other children who are native speakers of the target language.

Common to all schools was the practice of developing special features inherent in the overall program to meet the need of the population represented at the school. Working with second language learners in the light of the current accountability climate elicited some creative strategies from educators. For example, tutoring before and after school occurred twice weekly for all students in the program at one school. At many of the schools, strategies from second language methodology such as ESL (English as a Second Language,) TPR (Total Physical Response) and the Natural Approach were used for both populations. What sets these programs apart is that these schools were observed using these strategies with language majority speakers learning a second language instead of the reverse, which is usually seen in bilingual programs meant to benefit language minority students. In effect, this created fully integrated ESL and SFL (Spanish as a Foreign Language) programs within each classroom. This had powerful social effect, as we watched the children operate effectively in heterogeneous groups and in self-selected groups. Native English speakers and native Spanish speakers learned in the early grades of the program the degree to which they needed one another. Rather than separating over difference, we saw children appearing to value the differences between each other. Teachers used various strategies to encourage this mixing, including project work for small groups, cooperative learning, and large group confidence building activities.

Another strategy noted was the explicit instruction of appropriate student response at the upper levels when first language peers criticized the accent of second language learners of the minority language. For example, when a native speaker of one language jeered at a peer attempting to speak that language as her second language, she had a patterned response which he immediately recognized and respected: “We don't make fun of language in this class.” Typically, such strategies have been required of language minority students on an individual basis and have been implicit. By making the strategies explicit, this teacher apparently hoped to facilitate language production by both groups.

**Materials**

Quality materials must be available in each language. If teacher-made texts and other materials are available in one language while the other language represented has professional, company-made materials, this sends a clear message to all participants regarding the value of each language. Both teachers and districts had many strategies to assure a provision of quality materials in both languages. Many of the districts visited were committed to the program and facilitated teacher time to preview, purchase and created equitable classroom materials in each language. In one of the schools, the teachers had come together to establish lists of items needed.
for a successful program. Then parents facilitated the purchase of the items through fund-raisers and spent time at the school arranging the materials for common use by the teachers in hands-on room just for science and math instruction. An additional strategy for providing quality literacy materials for each class on a limited basis was observed at a school that housed any material not being used in the central library. The library was divided by language to facilitate easy access by teachers and students. Materials were scheduled thematically by teachers for extended time periods such as four to six weeks.

**Training**

Teacher training in dual language methodology is preferable before initiating the program. Bilingual teachers untrained in the methodology of second language education and the specifics of Dual Language models are more likely to code-switch, translate and otherwise fail to isolate each of the languages in verbal and written form. Teachers used interesting strategies to attain training. In one case, the teachers brought the idea of the program to the administrator and proceeded to provide research and ideas to facilitate discussion. Once the administrator bought in to the program, the community became involved and teacher training was facilitated at the school level. In another city, there was a district-wide initiation of the program. This facilitated quite a different experience of all involved. One school in this district demonstrated high satisfaction with the program and a clear understanding of the established methodology.

Faculty at another school discussed being overwhelmed by the expectations put onto them before they had been trained and fully understood prescribed methodology. Though it was nice to enjoy administrative support, some of the faculty felt that the program had been initiated on too large of a basis, at the district level, with concurrent teacher training occurring. They talked about the frustration of trying to catch up in their own classrooms. When we visited, these teachers had used strategies of joining together and forming study groups with other teachers to avoid future burn-out in the program. This school was impressive with bilingual instruction and equity in language access, materials, environmental literacy and bilingual peers. The interviews indicated that though teachers’ professional learning strategies were working, their success had been hard-earned.

The administrators used interesting strategies to facilitate teacher training, both at the district and at the school level. One district encouraged school administrators as well as Dual Language teachers to attain certification in Bilingual Education. Other school administrators were able to use proficiency requirements when hiring new teachers for the program. This required the administrator to be aware of the research before proceeding too far with the program. Another administrator facilitated regular teacher attendance at professional conferences, such as NABE (National Association of Bilingual Education) and CABE (California Association of Bilingual Education).

**Administrative Support**

Administrative support is essential for success of the program long-term due to political implications inherent in Dual Language programming. In the schools that participated in this study, the administrative role turned out to be a common base upon which all other program components were laid. Both district and school administrators used a variety of strategies to facilitate a quality program. At the district level, funding for materials and training was provided for many of the schools to purchase materials. Another district developed a department expressly for the
purpose of facilitating programs and applied for Title VII funding, which was then made available for schools to access. This department then became a channel that responded to teachers’ needs and procured what teachers requested to improve their programs. This district also provided district level position(s) to support dual language programs. Several districts demonstrated commitment to second language learning and bilingualism. This became apparent through actions such as teacher training, in-service programs, district-produced materials provided for classroom use. One administrator needed the support of the superintendent to improve her program. The superintendent was supportive, for example in accepting and facilitating teacher visas to secure native language speakers and to provide for travel of Native American teachers to visit Spanish speaking countries.

For all of the schools that participated in this study the school administrator demonstrated an impressive commitment to bilingualism for all children and to bilingual education. At another school, the present administrator had come into the position after the initiating administrator retired. The teachers and administration at this school used various strategies to keep faculty new to the program versed in the professional research. One administrator discussed strategies for keeping the school in the district eye with representation at board meetings and other district functions. Most teachers indicated that their administrator used various strategies to make sure that they were included in instructional decision making. These administrators facilitated smooth program implementation with parent support. Several administrators noted that being committed to program staffing was the key to the success of the dual language program.

In addition to hiring and recruiting, administrators with successful programs had to ensure compatibility for planning partners and facilitate sufficient time on a consistent basis for regular teacher planning. Another facet of teacher planning that some administrators and teachers insisted upon was both horizontal and vertical planning. In this way, teachers in third grade, for example, were able to provide instruction consistent with the other third grade classes as well as being better aware of what to plan for individual children from the second graders that would be coming in for the fall and preparing them for teachers of the next grade in the spring. Administrators that knew the importance of the community’s investment in the program facilitated transportation for parent attendance at various school training classes and for volunteering in classrooms. Additionally, both administrators and teachers discussed the importance of the administrators’ continual protection of the program. For example, this was evident when one principal made continual efforts to “educate” the district and parents about Dual Language research, and also refused to add new students to the program after the first grade.

**Elicited Response in the Second Language**

Examination of the role of elicited response of the second language in the program must occur and be agreed upon by all participants. Though each school elicits response in different and creative ways, without eliciting language production from children in their weakest language, oftentimes only language minority children will develop into productive bilinguals while language majority children develop only receptive skills. For educational as well as socio-political reasons, the role of elicited response in the program is often overlooked when planning a new program (Montague, 1999). The issue usually arises after the program is well under way when minority second language learners, Spanish speakers, are producing English but English speakers are not productive bilinguals. Administrators used strategies such as hiring teachers proficient in the language and facilitating team teaching so that as consistent language models, teachers were not required to switch languages. The teachers at one school particularly versed at producing
productive bilinguals had them plan performances and presentations in both languages. Another school had children produce bilingual videos for parents new to the program, welcoming them to the school and informing them about the program.

Additional Commonalities

As patterns emerged in the data, there were additional components that the dual language schools exhibited consistency with other schools in the study. One of main trends found in the schools was that of assuring that there was continuous assessment of language development in both languages was occurring on a continual basis. Additionally, faculties and administrators examined their strategies and program through assessing the program goals and outcomes on a continual basis. In all of the programs, support staff was enthusiastic about the program.

In all schools, thematic instruction and integration of the curriculum was planned and implemented. There was also a good deal of student-centered learning with “hands on” activities evident in the classrooms. There was purposeful integration of culture into the curriculum at these schools. Most of the schools had integration of culture into the social studies. Multicultural projects were displayed in many of the classroom, thus providing for another component of effective dual language programs. Technology was incorporated into the curriculum through hands-on projects that included Internet research. The faculty at these schools promoted a positive classroom climate and children and parents felt welcomed in the school. In all the schools, the teachers were committed to bilingualism and their dual language programs.

Discussion

The strategies presented here have been documented in an effort to identify commonalities among Dual Language classrooms, practitioners and programs in schools educating children in today’s climate of accountability. One school felt the need to withdraw from the public system and become a charter school in order to maintain the integrity of the dual language program in a state with a high stakes testing agenda. Another principal found herself fighting a constant political battle among public school officials outside of her immediate community to protect the program.

Dual language education is providing a solid academic background for all children while also providing a basis for bilingualism so that they will be more economically viable in the global economy of the future. The implications of this study are important and for the future of quality bilingual programs in United States schools. School districts located in U.S. borderland regions would do well to examine dual language education for children. In most countries around the world bilingualism is valued; however, in the United States monolingualism has been prevalent. If the United States is going to continue to be competitive in the global economy, bilingualism promoted through dual language programs will be a positive asset for children and the country.

Possibly the most significant, overall impression that this study provides is the remarkable effort made by each of the administrators and teachers to provide quality dual language instruction, often in the face of continual struggle. The belief that these professionals bring to their craft the benefits of bilingualism for all children was highly impressive at each site. Even teachers and administrators who did not have access to quality teacher training manifested impressively high standards.

The implementation of effective dual language programs demands a commitment to ensuring that the critical components of successful dual language programs addressed in this study are included in discussions among administrators, teachers, parents, and community members as they
prepare to implement dual language programs in a school or district. As school districts look at moving from transitional bilingual programs or English as a second language programs to dual language programs, district administrators must assume responsibility for preparing children for the global society of the future. So, the question is deal or no deal?
References


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