

Can Dual Language Programs Support English Language Learners?

English language learners comprise nearly 10% of the K–12 public school student population in the U.S., and we can expect that number to rise. Traditional English as a second language (ESL) programs provide much-needed support through sheltered instruction and intensive review of vocabulary and grammar, but they don't allow students to make consistent use of their primary languages and cultures.

Not all English language learners are native Spanish speakers. However, data compiled by James Johnson, Director of the Urban Investment Strategies Center at University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School, shows that Hispanics make up 51% of majority-minority neighborhoods and are the fastest growing demographic in the United States. At 14%, Hispanic teenagers are currently also the highest percentage of high school dropouts in the U.S. Johnson posits that to be successful, these students require soft skills—cultural and linguistic literacy and preparation for the world we live in now.

Dual language immersion programs support development of those soft skills in students, regardless of demographic backgrounds. The words “dual language immersion” or “bilingual classroom” sometimes cause the knee-jerk reaction of, “But students need to learn English!” I have personally heard that phrase spoken by parents and teachers alike throughout my experience as a dual language educator and program manager.

In reality, dual language immersion programs support both native Spanish speakers and native English speakers in becoming bilingual, bicultural and biliterate. By learning core content through Spanish language and culture, Spanish-speaking students learn to appreciate their own heritages and English-speaking students acquire access to another language and culture. These programs model the most effective methods for integrating students' first and second languages, which help them consistently score higher than peers in traditional programs on English standardized testing.

The cultural contexts of dual language immersion programs are what distinguish powerful, integrative language learning environments from curricular add ons that separate language and content. Establishing these learning environments doesn't require complete overhauls of established curricula or expensive program models. I witnessed a powerful example of integrated cultural context and language in a public school in Southwest Detroit.

Academy of the Americas, located in what's lovingly referred to as Detroit's "Mexicantown," seamlessly blends Spanish language learning with cultural and academic content in a way that honors the diverse backgrounds of students' families and communities. Even with limited resources, Academy of the Americas manages to maintain a bilingual program that fosters students' academic development. The school's neighborhood, which is almost 60% Hispanic and is a mix of Mexican and Central American cultures, exemplifies the effects of ethnic and racial segregation and is plagued by poverty and crime.

But the parents, teachers and students at the school take enormous pride in the Spanish language and its heritage. While the school is 98% Hispanic and serves almost entirely native Spanish speakers, the English speakers who live in the surrounding area are affected by the school community. They go to restaurants owned by parents at the school or work with them at local businesses. Locals express their inspiration to learn another language because of the passion for learning they see at community events sponsored by the school.

By contrast, 30 minutes away in Ann Arbor where I attended the University of Michigan for graduate school, the public schools did not offer dual language immersion programs. Ann Arbor, unlike Southwest Detroit, is a relatively affluent community and is 73% white. I assisted with a heritage language after-school program that attempted to teach native Spanish speakers their own language. The parents of those students were often hesitant to speak Spanish at home and encouraged their children to only speak English at school. And many of those students were being outperformed by their English-speaking peers in reading and math. Today, communities like Ann Arbor are taking note of the power of dual language immersion programs. It's becoming clearer that when students gain access to more than one language and are exposed to cultures outside of their own, the impact goes beyond test scores.

This article was originally authored by Meg Van Voorhis (@mcvanv), Manager of Dual Language Programs and Instructional Services at VIF International Education. It is part of a blog series written by [VIF International Education \(@vifglobaled\)](#)¹ on global education and equitable preparation in the classroom published on [Getting Smart](#)² (@Getting_Smart.) Join the conversation on Twitter using #globaled. For more, check out ([Global Education and Equitable Preparation](#))³.

¹ https://www.viflearn.com/?utm_source=Getting%20Smart&utm_medium=gs_blog&utm_campaign=article7

² <http://gettingsmart.com/>

³ <http://learn.vifprogram.com/getting-smart-global-equity.html>