

In Spring 2014, a group of researchers in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) Department of Research and Evaluation conducted focus group sessions with bilingual teachers at eight AISD dual language (DL) elementary schools. From a list of 64 DL campuses, nine were selected based on years in the program, pilot or non-pilot status, program type (one- or two-way), and the Dual Language Enrichment (DLE) classroom observation ratings for Fall 2013 (Gómez & Gómez, 2014). Principals were contacted at those campuses and invited to participate; only one declined participation. In most cases, all eligible bilingual teachers were invited to the focus group sessions, except for teachers on campuses that had more than 15 DL teachers; in which case, researchers randomly selected 15. Overall, 116 teachers were invited, of which 66% ($n = 76$) attended. Table 1 illustrates the sample of participating campuses.

Table 1. Sample of Dual Language Schools That Participated in the Spring 2014 Focus Groups

	Years in program	Pilot status	Program type	Observation rating
Campus A	4	Pilot	One-way	Unsatisfactory
Campus B	4	Pilot	Two-way	Proficient
Campus C	4	Pilot	One-way	Exemplary
Campus D	3	Non-pilot	Two-way	Unsatisfactory
Campus E	3	Non-pilot	One-way	Below expectations
Campus F	3	Non-pilot	Two-way	Proficient
Campus G	3	Non-pilot	Two-way	Proficient
Campus H	1	Non-pilot	One-way	Proficient

Note. Campus names were masked for confidentiality reasons.

Focus group sessions were held after school during April and May. Two researchers attended each session; one served as facilitator, while the other one took notes and audio recorded. Transcripts and recordings were reviewed and responses for each question organized into themes (see Appendix for the focus group protocol). The following report presents major emerging themes within responses for each question. Reported themes emerged in at least three schools, unless noted.

Co-teaching in DL Classrooms

To meet the criteria to teach in a DL classroom and to accommodate the native language of the student population on campuses, co-teaching is common in AISD schools. Participants were asked to discuss the prevalence of co-teaching on their campuses and describe this setting.

All participating schools with a two-way DL model reported some co-teaching on their campuses because of the ratios of native English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students. Some teachers in two-way schools described dividing their teaching assignments for English language arts and Spanish language arts. However, because co-teaching is contingent upon the students' population, teachers reported that it varied yearly.

“Next year we won’t co-teach anymore because when we switch from one year to the next the number of English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students change.”

Two schools with a one-way DL model reported using co-teaching, as well, mostly to accommodate non-English language learners (ELLs) placed in a DL classroom. Teachers referred to this type of setting as “mixed classrooms.” A teacher described it in the following way: “We have some students that are not in the DL program; they are English-only students and they can’t make a full class... We had to separate those students for reading only.”

The DLE Model and Students’ Needs

Participants were asked to describe the DL program at their schools and were prompted to discuss if they were following the Gómez and Gómez (2014) DLE model as prescribed.

Box 1. The Gómez and Gómez (2014) Dual Language Enrichment Model Guidelines

Percentage of instructional time, by language

70:30 (Pre-K–1st grade): 70% instructional time in the first language (L1) and 30% in the second language (L2)

50:50 (2nd–5th grade): 50% instructional time in L1 and 50% in L2

Language of the day (LOD) and language of instruction (LOI)

LOD: language spoken within the school during non-instructional time

- Monday, Wednesday, Friday: Spanish
- Tuesday and Thursday: English

LOI: language spoken during instructional time

- Reading/language arts:
 - * Pre-K–1st grade: in native language
 - * 2nd–5th grade: in Spanish and English
- Science in Spanish
- Social studies in Spanish
- Math in English

Participants at most campuses reported adhering to the DLE model’s main guidelines. In general, they felt positive about using the model and agreed that the DL program validated “students’ culture” and allowed them to keep their heritage language. Many teachers acknowledged that using some of the Gómez and Gómez (2014) DLE model’s key components (see Box 2) had proven successful in their classrooms. In reference to bilingual pairs, a teacher explained, “Collaboration and scaffolding for peers helps them [students] and helps teachers ... It allows us to work with students who need more help while others are working in independent pairs.”

Many participants, however, discussed challenges in following the DLE model as prescribed. Two-way DL teachers reported that too much English was spoken by students at the campus and that Spanish native speakers who were strong in English communicated in that language more often than in Spanish. Some teachers argued that English native

speakers were not at the expected grade level to receive social studies and science instruction in Spanish. In reference to this, a teacher explained, “For the English students that are supposed to be learning Spanish, that little time in school is the only time that they have access to Spanish; at home, the parents don’t speak Spanish and they will not watch TV in Spanish and so their Spanish is not advancing as much as the Spanish speakers’ English.”

One-way DL teachers struggling with the DLE model explained that teaching mathematics (math) in English in prekindergarten (pre-K) was challenging, especially at the beginning of the school year, because many students had very basic English skills. Other teachers reported struggling with adhering to the language of instruction in mixed classrooms. When asked to explain the reason for mixed classrooms, a teacher commented, “We don’t have those ideal numbers; [therefore,] we have to put some of them in a dual language classroom.” Finally, a group of 3rd- and 4th-grade teachers acknowledged that, even though they taught at a DL campus, they believed transitioning native Spanish-speaking students into English would

benefit them because testing in middle school would be in English, the DL program did not continue past 5th grade, and the science test was easier in English.

The DL Program and Other District Initiatives

Although the question for this section was formulated to learn more about how the DL program worked in conjunction with other programs on campuses (e.g., Texas Literacy Initiative, REACH), the majority of teachers commented on: (a) the impact of the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) on the DLE model, (b) receiving discordant messages between the Department of English Language Learners and other departments, and (c) misalignment between curriculum road maps (CRM) and the DLE model.

Teachers who commented on STAAR testing and the DL program explained that their campus administration had decided students would receive science instruction in English even though the model prescribed Spanish. Similar to comments reported in the previous section, a common belief was voiced that the STAAR science test was “easier” in English. A couple of teachers in two different schools also commented that ELLs were tested in English because “they can use accommodations on the English test,” which could help them perform better. A teacher simply stated, “STAAR is priority over dual language.”

“The district asks us to do dual language, but there are so many demands that we have on top of that.”

Participants who perceived conflicting messages across district departments provided various examples. One teacher described that his or her school had received a mandate from the associate superintendent to follow a strict schedule, and that had interfered with many of the “hands-on” activities suggested

by the DLE model. Another teacher argued that teaching phonics in English was not part of the model’s components, yet “it is fundamental in instruction” and “should not be ignored.”

Finally, participants across three campuses argued that CRMs for the DL program (in English and Spanish) were not aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). A focus group participant described this in the following way: “The skills of the TEKS in English don’t align with the DL [program]. For instance, at the beginning of the year, we have to do inference in dual language, but in English they are doing main idea.”

Expectations in the DL Program

When asked if the expectations in the DL program were higher than expectations in the general education classroom, a large majority of participants agreed that the DL program had higher expectations for students. Pre-K teachers argued that learning math in English was challenging for Spanish-speaking students, especially at the beginning of the school year. They also noted that, compared with AISD’s pre-K curriculum, the DL model expected students to write sentences by the end of the school year. Other teachers advocated for “raising the standard of expectations” across the board. One participant stated, “The higher order thinking, the teaching to the top 10%, the collaboration between peers— all of those pieces can be implemented in English classrooms not just the dual language.”

Various teachers in two-way DL classrooms felt that the DL program was more challenging for English speakers than for Spanish speakers or students in the general education classroom. They mentioned that English speakers did not receive any Spanish support outside school; therefore, it was challenging to make

them speak Spanish. A teacher noted, “Students in 2nd grade are doing well in reading and writing, but can’t speak it.” These types of comments also were heard when teachers discussed the DL model at their campus and students’ needs.

Resources and Support

An overwhelming number of participants expressed their need for more materials and resources to set up a DL classroom. Various teachers at different campuses requested a

“Unless you have your own collection of dual language materials there [are] not any. There are not enough materials to practice. As teachers, we need to translate but I don’t get paid to translate.”

color printer to “have everything labeled in English and Spanish.”¹ A teacher complained about having to buy cartridges and to print at home. Many teachers mentioned needing more materials, particularly for the centers because “[the] Gómez brothers are very specific about what they want their centers to look like.” Many participants also noted that it had been challenging to obtain Spanish materials in science and social studies, and that they had to translate. A teacher explained that most of the media (e.g., Brain Pop Jr) was in English, and, although it was useful, it did not reinforce the language of instruction. A focus group participant at a two-way DL school raised the fact that Spanish-dominant students were receiving STAAR-related instruction in English when they should have been receiving it in Spanish if that was the language in which they were expected to be tested.

Teachers’ comments about receiving support from their principal and/or assistant principal were mostly positive. In general, participants felt supported even though they alluded to different types of support at various campuses. Some participants described feeling supported because their principal was “resourceful” in finding money and materials to set-up their classrooms. Teachers at another campus felt supported to not follow the DL model as prescribed because their principal “understands the reality of our campus.” A few participants mentioned that, although their principal was an advocate for the DL program, they felt partially supported because of the principal’s need to comply with requirements from district administrators that were not necessarily aligned with the DLE model. In reference to this, a teacher noted that the “[principal] is in support of dual language, but the onslaught of pressure from the area superintendent makes it difficult to stand up to them.”

Professional Development Activities

When discussing professional development activities that influenced teaching, several participants across campuses complimented the biliteracy training session with Sherrill Hugo. Teachers appreciated that the presenter shared specific strategies that could be used for second language acquisition. However, a teacher pointed out that “only a few of us got to go” and that “it is one that everybody needs to get in.”

Participants also were asked what types of professional development opportunities would support DL instruction. Across all campuses, teachers requested professional development sessions with “real

“At the 3-day training [Gomez & Gomez Dual Language Training Institute], we didn’t get enough share, but lots of tell, tell, tell...”

classrooms to model” and more “hands-on” experiences. A teacher praised the district Adelante conference for this reason: “You could hear from teachers what they were doing in their classrooms ... and they had model classrooms to visit and you could see their notebooks.”

¹The Gómez and Gómez DLE model recommends that materials in one language be displayed in one color while materials in the other language be displayed in a different color.

Participants frequently wished they had more opportunities to visit DL classrooms, either at other AISD campuses or in other school districts that had proven to be successful in implementing the DLE model.

Although focus group participants attended the 3-day DL training institute (DLTI), teachers at different campuses wished for more training on DL strategies—specifically on research centers, bilingual pairs, bilingual literacy centers, and math instruction in English. In line with previous comments, some teachers were dissatisfied after attending the DLTI training because it lacked hands-on examples, presenters did not answer questions, and the training did not provide enough ideas and activities.

DL Best Practices

Aside from the Gómez and Gómez (2014) DLE model’s key components, researchers were interested in knowing what instructional strategies teachers thought were successful. Unique responses emerged within each campus. The following list presents teachers’ recommended practices, accompanied by a short description of the assignment:

- *Sign language*: “Using sign language or hand gestures to remember certain vocabulary”
- *Visuals*: “[Using] visuals to present the material; it can’t all be lecture”
- *On-campus training opportunities*: “There are bimonthly meetings; we invite all faculty and we do refreshers on the components of dual language, have Q&A sessions, support sessions. In preparation for the Gómez and Gómez visit we would visit and critique each other’s classrooms.”
- *Turn and talk*: “When [students] work with a partner and they need to talk”
- *Flexible classroom grouping*: “Having medium and medium-low students [in the same classroom]”
- *Collaborate*: “We delegate the responsibility and each one of us is responsible for a content area. We take that content area and fully develop it at the grade level.”
- *Total physical response (TPR)*: “It is drama based. Every day we act a paragraph out and we have a gesture that goes with it.”

Box 2. Key Components of the Gómez and Gómez (2014) Dual Language Enrichment (DLE) Model

Bilingual Pairs or Bilingual Groups: Students are paired up all day based on language and content ability to support each other’s language and content learning.

Bilingual Learning Centers (BLC): BLCs are designated areas in the classroom where students learn in bilingual pairs. Activities in the BLCs are in the LOD and 30 minutes per day. Pre-K through 2nd grade should have a BLC for each of the core subject areas. BLC activities should complement skills learned during content instruction and provide on-going reinforcement of grade-level standards.

Conceptual Refinement (CR): CR is held for 59 minutes at the end of each lesson cycle to support L2 learners in math, science, and social studies. CR is in the language of instruction (LOI).

Student Generated Alphabet (SGA): Students create alphabets with grade-appropriate vocabulary in English and Spanish.

Interactive Word Walls (WW): The teacher and student initiate word walls in English and Spanish.

Project Based Learning (PBL): Inquiry-based approach for learning content through discovery, projects and research.

Bilingual Research Centers (BRC): BRCs provide a focus on research, inquiry, and project-based learning, while fostering concept and vocabulary acquisition in L1 and L2 during core content instruction.

Specialized Vocabulary Enrichment Activities (SVE): SVE is held for 20 to 30 minutes once per week to develop key academic vocabulary in the opposite language of instruction for science, math and social studies.

Challenges in Implementing the DLE Model

“When we went to the Adelante conference and these folks from KIPP were talking about how successful they have been, all AISD teachers were very impressed. But in KIPP they have longer days.”

Although participants shared some of the challenges in implementing the DLE model (see previous sections), teachers were asked to discuss them more in depth and to mention any other challenges. Most participants in six out of eight focus group campuses listed lack of time as their main problem. An overwhelming number of teachers indicated that, when on a time constraint, bilingual centers were

eliminated from the schedule. According to the DLE model, BLCs should take place every day for 30 minutes; one teacher who explained why said, “The amount [of time that] centers required did not fit into the schedule.” Another teacher described that if no time was available to fit everything in the schedule, then “bilingual centers are what goes.” Lack of time to prepare materials and set up the DL classroom was brought up in various focus groups, as well. A teacher wished that the district could pay substitutes to have “one day of working with our team or with a pair and prepare materials and organize.” To comply with other district initiatives, participants admitted that they had to “shave off time from dual language” or that they had to “drop something” from the DL model. Finally, a teacher stated, “There needs to be more time for small group instruction” when students are low performing in a subject area.

Lack of Spanish resources emerged as a challenge mostly at two-way DL campuses. Once more, teachers pointed out a shortage of science materials in Spanish. A teacher stated, “[There are] not enough resources, especially in science. We use a lot of online resources, some of which are footnoted in CRMs for science, but most are in English so that means teachers have to do a lot of searching and translating.” A kindergarten teacher added that because they did not use textbooks, they needed to translate materials from teachers’ manuals.

Lastly, some participants voiced again their frustration with receiving discordant messages from the Department of English Language Learners and other departments in the district or their principal. Teachers at one school claimed they had received different messages from their principal and central office in regard to the DL application process for the 2013–2014 school year. A couple of early childhood teachers at another campus described that the “quadrants” for each subject area required by the DLE model did not align with the Early Childhood Department’s integrated curriculum. In reference to this issue, a teacher stated that she felt “caught in the middle” of what these two departments said.

Challenges in Implementing the DLE Model and the STAAR

The DLE model suggests that students test in the language of instruction. Consequently, students take the math test in English, reading/language arts test in the native language for Pre-K through 4th grade and in the students’ second language in 5th grade, and social studies and science in Spanish. This recommendation differs from the testing expectations in the late exit bilingual education model, in which students are transitioned to test in English by 3rd grade. Therefore, researchers were interested in learning how teachers managed this change in practice.

Since the DL program is in its fourth year of operation in pilot schools and its third year in non-pilot schools, mostly 3rd and 4th grade teachers addressed this question, and some 2nd grade teachers voiced their

opinions, as well. A 1st grade teacher admitted, “[As a 1st grade teacher], I am not concerned with my kids taking the STAAR test this year.”

Some teachers felt confident that, if implemented with fidelity, the DLE model would not interfere with meeting state accountability standards. Teachers acknowledged that the DLE model is “a gifted and talented program” and that it “has so many best practices provided on a daily basis” that it will prepare students to take the test and “do well.” Many participants expressed their support and belief in the DL model and its results. Referring to dual language research results (Collier & Thomas, 2009), a few teachers requested that administrators be patient and, in the words of one teacher, “let [the program] run its course.”

“The last few months after the decision was made for students to test in English then the focus was on preparing bilingual students to test in English.”

Although some teachers expressed confidence in following the DL model and meeting state accountability standards, others commented that their campuses were having discussions or had decided to prepare ELLs to test in English. As a

results, participants noted that the process of defining the language of instruction had become “very confusing.” One teacher stated, “We [campus] just need to decide if we’re going to be a dual language school or not.” Finally, it is important to note that many teachers were concerned that the science STAAR test was more rigorous in Spanish.

Participants’ Final Comments

Teachers were asked to provide any additional comments about the DL program that had not been addressed during the focus group session. In general, participants brought up topics that had been previously discussed (e.g., needing color printers, more professional development on DL strategies, and more time to show results). However, a few teachers across three campuses argued that parents had no knowledge of the DLE model or the research to support it. Participants discussed the need for more parent involvement and suggested holding training sessions only for parents. Although they praised the work of their campus parent support specialists, teachers called it “limited” and said parents needed to be supported and receive education on the program so that, in the words of one teacher, “they can help support their child.”

Finally, some participants from two campuses requested more bilingual staff to serve their Spanish-speaking population. A teacher mentioned that it would be beneficial to have a DL coach to serve as an “advocate” for them.

Conclusions

Although teachers at some campuses were stronger supporters of the Gómez and Gómez (2014) DLE model than were others, the overall perceptions toward DL and the theory that supports it were positive regardless of years in the program, program type, or DLE observation rating. Similar themes regarding challenges in following the DLE model as prescribed, impact of other district initiatives and district departments on DL, and professional development needs and resources and support emerged across campuses.

Lack of time during the school day to incorporate all the Gómez and Gómez (2014) key components and to

prepare materials was commonly discussed during focus groups. Because bilingual centers take up 30 minutes each day and require preparing materials in each core content area, the majority of teachers tended to eliminate them when time was not sufficient. Setting up a DL classroom involves developing word dictionaries and word walls in both languages and preparing materials for bilingual centers, among other things; therefore, if instructional materials in Spanish are not provided by the Department of English Language Learners, teachers do not have time to translate them.

Another theme that commonly emerged across campuses was STAAR testing and the language of instruction. Pressure coming from administrators to meet accountability standards has led schools to elect English as the language in which ELLs will test, which consequently affects the language of instruction. This is most common in science due to the strong belief that the Spanish test is more rigorous than the English test because of its high level of vocabulary. Furthermore, participants frequently commented that meeting competing demands from different departments within the district has been a challenge and that English and Spanish CRMs are not always aligned.

Across all campuses, teachers requested more professional development opportunities on DL strategies. Many referred to the biliteracy training session as an example of professional development opportunities that had influenced their DL instruction, and they appreciated that the presenter provided applied examples. Teachers repeatedly mentioned that professional development activities needed to be more “hands-on” and wished they could visit exemplary AISD DL classrooms.

Finally, aside from requesting appropriate instructional materials in both languages for each content area, teachers frequently expressed the need for a color printer to generate all the materials required by the DLE model.

References

- Collier, V., & Thomas, W.P. (2009). *Educating English learners for a transformed world*. Albuquerque, NM: Fuentes Press.
- Gómez, L., & Gómez R. (2014). *PK—4th grade dual language classroom observations summary report* (AISD internal report). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.

Appendix. Items in Dual Language Focus Group Protocol, Spring 2014

1. What grades do you teach?
2. Do you co-teach or team-teach? How are assignments divided during the day with your co-teacher/team-teacher?
3. Can you describe the dual language model that is used in your school? Is it a one-way or two-way school? How do you think the model fits the needs (academic, linguistic) of your students?
4. How do you make the dual language program work with other programs that you have on your campus? For example: TLI, special education, GT, REACH...? Do you feel that the expectations in the dual language program are higher than in the general education classroom?
5. Have you received sufficient support from your campus principal or assistant principal? What additional resources and/support would you need?
6. What dual language professional development (PD) activities have influenced your teaching? What other types of PD opportunities would you like to have to support dual language instruction?
7. In general, are there any practices you or your school have implemented that you feel have been particularly successful in the dual language program and you'd like to share with other schools that are attempting to implement a dual language program? What are they and why do you think they have been successful?
8. In general, what are the challenges for your school and/or you to implement the dual language program? How can the district help you and your school address these challenges?
9. What are the challenges for your school and/or you to implement the dual language and at the same time to meet the standards of STAAR? How could the district help you and your school address these challenges?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to add about your school's dual language program?

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