

Elementary Dual Language Teachers’ Feedback on the Program

January and February 2016

Overview

On January 26, 2016, Austin Independent School District (AISD) district staff met with 23 elementary school lead teachers in the dual language (DL) program to obtain their opinions and recommendations about the program. A second opportunity to meet with 27 DL teachers occurred on February 11, 2016. The discussion format consisted of small groups of teachers, one of whom was a note taker, and groups responded to three questions about the district’s DL program. Teachers’ responses were noted, and the most common response themes were summarized in this report. This information is being used by the district’s newly formed bilingual innovation design team to make recommendations for improving the implementation of the DL program in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years.

Does dual language work for all students?

The question of whether dual language works for all students was presented only at the January 2016 meeting. Not all teachers agreed that the program in its current form worked for all students, although most agreed that some program components were aligned with principles of good instruction for all students. The following conditions were mentioned by some teachers as essential for the program’s success: adequate student enrollment [both English language learners (ELLs) and non-ELLs]; adequate staffing (to avoid mixed classrooms); adequate supply of materials in both languages; consistent program implementation across schools, with some flexibility; DL program commitment from kindergarten through grade 12; campus administrators knowledgeable of DL; support from district departments, school staff, and parents; highly qualified bilingual teachers; and students with grade-level abilities in their native language (L1).

Teachers mentioned the following as challenges with DL on their campuses: state accountability and testing requirements (grades 3 through 5); high student mobility within the district; “mixed” classrooms, where students from bilingual programs are put in the same classroom with students not participating in any bilingual program in order to meet the district’s staffing-to-student formula; lack of well-trained, highly experienced bilingual teachers; lack of adequate administrator knowledge or support of DL; inconsistency in DL program implementation; lack of flexibility in implementing the DL model as prescribed by Gómez and Gómez (2015).¹

¹ Gómez, L., & Gómez, R. (2015). *The Gómez & Gómez dual language enrichment (DLE) model*. Retrieved from <http://dlti.us/3.html>

Required or Optional DL Components

Teachers at both the January and February meetings were asked which DL model components they believed should be required, and which should be optional. Some teachers indicated that all components should be required, but the schools should be given flexibility within those options with respect to how they are operationalized and used.

When asked to suggest required DL components, teachers mentioned the following:

- Bilingual pairing or grouping of students
- Word walls
- Content bulletin boards
- Writing, journaling
- Labeling of items in the classroom; color coding items by language
- Language of instruction, by subject area
- Language of the day
- Bridging activities from L1 (native language) to L2 (second language)
- Conceptual refinement
- Specialized vocabulary enrichment
- Bilingual research centers

However, when asked to suggest optional DL components, teachers mentioned some items that were similar to those suggested as required components, emphasizing flexibility through school-based or teacher choices about how to implement components:

- Student-generated alphabet
- Language of the day
- Bilingual pairs
- Word walls
- Language of instruction, by subject area
- Language of the day
- Bilingual research centers or bilingual learning centers
- Specialized vocabulary enrichment
- Labeling of items in the classroom; color coding items, by language
- Conceptual refinement

Suggestions for Improving DL Program Implementation

Teachers at both meetings were asked to provide some feasible suggestions for improving DL program implementation. Some suggestions aligned with teachers' responses to prior questions asked during their discussions.

- Monitor DL program fidelity to ensure campus administrators are held accountable according to state education regulations when decisions are made on whether ELLs are ready for program exit (i.e., they have been successful in English academic and language achievement).
- Campus administrators need to have high levels of knowledge and support for DL.
- Allow DL flexibility due to student mobility, to better meet the needs of students who come to school with different language and academic ability levels. However, a DL model structure emphasizing best instructional practices should be explicitly defined and followed by campuses.

AISD Dual Language Program

AISD's Dual Language (DL) program is a bilingual education program offered in the following format: one-way DL (serving only ELLs) and two-way DL (serving both ELLs and non-ELLs).

For more information on the DL program, see the following AISD web page:

<http://www.austinisd.org/academics/ell/duallanguage>

For more information on state education laws and guidance about bilingual education, see the following Texas Education Agency web page:

<http://tea.texas.gov/bilingual/esl/education/>

- Ensure there are adequate curriculum resources in Spanish for every grade level at which DL is implemented.
- AISD departments should be aligned to support DL. This includes academic curriculum departments, bilingual department, associate superintendents, and human resources.
- Administrators should be trained/educated on the goals and purpose of the DL program.
- The community should be included in the decision of which program model will be adopted at their school, and the program implemented should take the community needs into consideration.
- More support and more professional development/training opportunities should be available to teachers, specially modelling by exemplary teachers, and instructional strategies to use in the classroom.
- An accountability system should be in place for campuses implementing the DL program to make sure they are following the model chosen.
- There should be more emphasis on the first language, for example minimum of 50% of the day in Spanish.
- Adopt better and less subjective assessment tools at the pre-K level.
- All teachers and campus staff should be trained in the DL model at the same time.

Comments About Dual Language Model Options

Teachers at the February meeting were asked to indicate questions or comments about three proposed DL program models. Each model represented an initial ratio of first language to English language (50/50, 70/30, and 80/20).

Comments illustrated the difference in opinions about the three models. Some teachers indicated that the 50/50 model was the most concise and allowed students to develop literacy in their first language. Whereas others indicated that this model had shortcomings for schools when students have poor first language skills. Similarly, some teachers indicated they liked the models with a higher ratio of first language to English language, especially in the early grades when students are still developing literacy. Interestingly, some teachers summarized these differences in opinions by suggesting a need for flexibility from the district and a sense that campuses should be allowed to choose a DL model that best suits their student population.

Next Steps

Results from the elementary dual language teachers' discussions will inform the work of the district's bilingual innovation design team, as they plan the structure of the DL program for 2016—2017 and beyond.

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