



Mixed Language Instruction in Elementary Classrooms

What is the impact on students' academic performance?

Background

The term *mixed classrooms* in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) refers to elementary school classrooms that contain a mixture of English learner students (ELs) in a bilingual (BE) program with students not in a BE program. The BE program can be either transitional late exit (LE) or dual language (DL). Other students may include native English-speaking students (not participating in two-way DL) or ELs in an English as a second language (ESL) program. Because the instructional requirements vary for students in these programs, a problem may occur for teachers providing literacy instruction and for students receiving instruction. The goal of ESL and LE is to transition students to English, but not necessarily to preserve the students' native language. The goal of DL is to ensure students maintain and strengthen skills in both the native non-English language and English. For students in the DL program, the state education code §89.1227 (<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter089/ch089bb.html>) defines the minimum requirements for DL as follows:

- (a) A dual language immersion program model must address all curriculum requirements specified in Chapter 74, Subchapter A, of this title (relating to Required Curriculum) to include foundation and enrichment areas, English language proficiency standards, and college and career readiness standards.
- (b) A dual language immersion program model shall be a full-time program of academic instruction in English and another language.
- (c) **A minimum of 50% of instructional time must be provided in the language other than English.**
- (d) Implementation should:
 - (1) begin at prekindergarten, kindergarten, or Grade 1, as applicable;
 - (2) continue without interruption incrementally through the elementary grades whenever possible; and
 - (3) consider expansion to middle school and high school whenever possible.
- (e) A dual language immersion program model shall be developmentally appropriate and based on current best practices research, (Texas Education Agency, 2015).



Research

A mixed classroom violates the Texas DL program requirement (c) listed on the previous page, which states a minimum of 50% of instructional time must be provided in the language other than English. Consequently, in a mixed classroom, teachers face the following challenge: there are students who should be receiving English instruction for the entire day, while there are BE DL program students who should be receiving at least 50% of their instruction in Spanish or other native language. Based on a literature review, no research was found that specifically examined the impact of mixed classrooms on students, and this may reflect that mixed classrooms are not used. In fact, best instructional practice for ELs, as reported by Lindholm-Leary (2007), recommends supporting literacy learning in the student's first language to establish a basis for learning English.

In a mixed classroom, it is challenging to provide 50% of the instruction in the native language; thus, many students may not be learning in both languages. In addition, as reported by Howard et al (2007), monolingual instructional delivery (i.e., different periods of time devoted to instruction in and through each of the two languages respectively) is more effective than mixing languages. According to the National Literacy Panel's compendium of research, as reported by Goldenberg (2008), teaching students to read in their first language promotes higher levels of reading achievement in English. Furthermore, Espinosa (2013) reported that learning two languages in DL programs also benefits non-ELs' academic success.

AISD Context

AISD offers both one-way and two-way DL programs, in addition to transitional LE and ESL programs for ELs (see sidebar). AISD's Multilingual Education Team staff have provided suggested protocols for instructional time and treatment in AISD mixed language classrooms (i.e., https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dept/ell/AISD_Mixed_Language_Class_Protocols_1.pdf; and https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dept/ell/ScenarioA_Primary_Grades_02.15.16.pdf). Although this guidance was provided to elementary principals, feedback from staff indicate the protocols are not enough to solve the mixed classroom issue.

Two AISD Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) reports showed that AISD teachers and principals identified mixed classrooms as a barrier to effective DL program implementation, and they recommended eliminating mixed classrooms to improve DL instruction (i.e., https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dre-surveys/rb/R16.23_Elementary_Teachers_Feedback_on_the_Dual_Language_Program_2016-2017.pdf; and https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dre-surveys/rb/RB16.13_Principals_Platicas_on_Elementary_Dual_Language_Program_0.pdf).

Texas Public School Bilingual and ESL Programs

The BE/ESL program options for Texas public schools include the following, as defined by state law: bilingual transitional early exit, bilingual transitional LE, one-way DL, two-way DL, and ESL (content or pull-out). School staff recommend one of these educational support programs for EL students, and parents of these students may deny or accept the program offered. The two-way DL program also is offered to students who are not ELs who want to participate in a bilingual program.

A one-way DL program is offered only to ELs to help them learn both English and their native language, while a two-way DL program is offered to both ELs and native English-speaking students who will learn both English and the non-English language. For more information on the characteristics of each of these programs, please see the Texas Education Agency website at

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

AISD STAAR 2017 Reading Performance

AISD 2017 State of Texas Academic Assessments (STAAR) reading results for 3rd-, 4th-, and 5th-graders (including both ELs and non-ELs) in mixed and non-mixed classrooms were compared in terms of languages of assessment and passing rates.

Instruction and Testing

ELs may take the STAAR tests in English or in Spanish in grades 3 through 5. The language in which a student is tested typically matches the language in which that student was taught (and possibly, the language in which the student is academically stronger). For students in one-way DL or two-way DL, instruction should be balanced in the two languages, but this most likely will not occur in a mixed classroom. However, ELs in LE or ESL programs are already transitioning to English, and ESL also will include students with home languages other than Spanish; consequently, a mixed classroom environment where more English than Spanish is being used is more consistent with the intent of those programs.

Language of Assessment

A data analysis indicated that smaller percentages of one-way DL ELs (3rd = 52%, 4th = 30%, and 5th = 22%) in mixed classrooms than of similar ELs in non-mixed classrooms (3rd = 64%, 4th = 63%, and 5th = 57%) took STAAR reading in Spanish. Because instruction and assessment languages are often aligned, it is likely that the majority of one-way DL mixed classroom instruction for these ELs took place in English rather than in Spanish. This is not consistent with DL program guidelines, which prescribe 50% of instruction in each language. Furthermore, it is recommended that, for reading, Spanish-speaking ELs in DL test in Spanish at 3rd and 4th grade, and begin a transition to testing in English in 5th grade. Similarly, for students in two-way DL, smaller percentages of 3rd-grade students took STAAR in Spanish in mixed classrooms (40%) than did so in non-mixed classrooms (51%). However, for 4th- and 5th-grade two-way DL, greater percentages of ELs in mixed classrooms (4th = 48%, 5th = 25%) than in non-mixed classrooms (4th = 34%, 5th = 19%) took STAAR in Spanish. Further analysis of ELs' language of assessment is needed. In addition, analysis of ELs' Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) performance in mixed and non-mixed classrooms is warranted to see whether these results are related to their STAAR language of assessment and performance.

Performance

Examining 2017 STAAR reading performance, one-way DL ELs in mixed classrooms (3rd = 54%, 4th = 58%, and 5th = 76%) had **lower** passing rates across grade levels than did similar ELs in non-mixed classrooms (3rd = 63%, 4th = 63%, and 5th = 81%). For two-way DL, 3rd-grade ELs had lower passing rates in mixed classrooms (63%) than did similar ELs in non-mixed classrooms (72%). However, in 4th and 5th grade, two-way DL ELs in mixed classrooms had higher passing rates (4th = 62%, 5th = 76%) than did similar ELs in non-mixed classrooms (4th = 54%, 5th = 62%). Thus, for one-way DL in all three grade levels and for two-way DL in 3rd grade, it seems students benefited from being in non-mixed classrooms. However, for two-way DL in 4th and 5th grade, mixed classrooms may not have been as detrimental to ELs' STAAR performance. Further investigation is needed to understand these results.

The DL program is not being implemented with fidelity in mixed classrooms because the goal of a DL program is bilingualism. Experts in the field recommend that DL classroom instruction be balanced between the two languages throughout the duration of the program. The fact that a larger percentage of DL students in mixed classrooms were being tested in English rather than in Spanish seems to indicate an imbalance in language of instruction. A mixed classroom setting with an emphasis on English may not support students in maintaining or improving their Spanish.

The potential negative impact of mixed classrooms also was observed in non-ELs' (native English speakers') STAAR reading performance. Non-ELs in two-way DL at grades 3 through 5, in mixed classrooms (3rd = 84%, 4th = 88%, and 5th = 96%) passed STAAR reading at **lower** rates than did similar students in non-mixed classrooms (3rd = 93%, 4th = 93%, and 5th = 98%). In addition, non-ELs who were not in the two-way DL program also had **lower** passing rates in mixed classrooms (3rd = 72%, 4th = 68%, and 5th = 81%) than did similar non-ELs in non-mixed classrooms (3rd = 82%, 4th = 81%, and 5th = 93%). Thus, non-ELs not in a BE program but in a mixed classroom showed lower passing rates.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Overall, AISD's 2017 STAAR reading results suggest that mixed language instruction in elementary classrooms may be associated with less Spanish instruction and testing, and often poorer reading test performance for both ELs and non-ELs, compared with non-mixed instruction. Further research is recommended to better understand the full impact of mixed and non-mixed instruction in elementary classrooms on students' language and academic learning. For example, additional assessment and instructional data should be examined to see whether differences in mixed versus non-mixed instruction classrooms have an impact on students long-term performance, at different grade levels, and in different subject areas. Students at early elementary grade levels (e.g., kindergarten through grade 2) and performance on other assessments (e.g., state's English proficiency test, other early reading measures) should be examined for the impact of mixed and non-mixed classroom instruction. AISD staff reported that mixed classrooms were a barrier to implementing DL programs. As program, instruction, and budget decisions are being made, AISD district and campus leadership should consider the possible consequences of having mixed or non-mixed instruction in elementary classrooms.

References

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