



September 2014

# Governance Brief

## English Learners in Focus, *Issue 2*

*The Promise of Two-Way Immersion Programs*

### Introduction

A fundamental goal of our education system is to prepare students for successful careers in an ever-changing world of work. As California businesses expand around the world, they will need personnel who can function effectively in multiple languages and cultures. To prepare our K-12 students for success we must be mindful of the global context into which they will emerge as a young workforce. Two-way immersion programs can utilize the strength of our diversity to ensure all students are well-prepared to thrive in an ever-more complex and globalized world.

### California's ethnic and linguistic diversity

California is well situated to meet the challenge of preparing students for success in a world that is increasingly interconnected. It is the most culturally diverse state in the country and its student population mirrors this diversity. More than half, 53%, of the state's students are Latino and an additional 20% are from non-white subgroups, principally Asians, 9%, African Americans, 6% and students from a mix of other groups. Non-Hispanic white students represent about 25% of California's K-12 population.<sup>1</sup>

The state is extremely linguistically diverse as well. California children come to school speaking an array of primary languages and almost one quarter, 23%, of the state's K-12 students are English learners (EL), students who are not yet proficient in English. Many of the world's languages are spoken by California's EL students: there are 30 languages in California schools that are spoken by 1,000 or more EL students each.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the vast majority (84%), speak Spanish as their home language.

There are English learners in all grade levels but the greatest concentrations are in the early grades and EL students make up a large share of all students in these grades. Nearly 40% of all kindergarteners and 36% of all K-3 students in California schools are English learners. A significant proportion, 23%, of students in Grades 4-6 are English learners and 13% of those in Grades 7-12 are EL students.<sup>3</sup>

### The need for effective strategies

Overall, our current practices and approaches are not meeting the mark when it comes to providing English learners with an effective education. One indicator of this is that nearly 60% of high school EL students have attended U.S. schools almost all of their schooling but have not attained sufficient levels of academic language and content skill to be reclassified as fluent English proficient (FEP).<sup>4</sup> Achievement gaps between EL students and their English fluent peers surface in the elementary grades and widen as students move up in grade level.<sup>5</sup> EL students also drop out at a rate that is twice that of their English fluent peers.<sup>6</sup>

These disappointing outcomes indicate how critical it is that we act early and effectively so that EL students do not begin to fall behind. From the moment English learners enter our schools, we must help them build a foundation of academic knowledge at the same time that they are learning communicative and academic language skills. Losing out on even a small increment of learning every year can quickly add up to a shortfall that is extremely challenging to overcome—both for students and teachers.

## A promising approach: two-way immersion

All of these factors—the importance of helping all students to be competitive in a global economy that values multiple cultures and languages, the resource of cultural and linguistic diversity among California’s students, and the need to improve outcomes for the state’s more than 1.3 million English learners—argue in favor of the instructional approach called two-way or dual immersion. This approach provides well-documented advantages to both English learner and English fluent students.

Dual language (or bilingual) education is an overall term used to describe a range of programs that integrate English learner and native English-speaking students for academic instruction in both English and the home language of the English learners (Table 1). These programs differ from English-only programs in their approach and goals. Clearly, one difference is the use of two languages. Another is that although the models share the goal of English language fluency and literacy for EL students, bilingual models have the additional goal of developing and maintaining students’ oral fluency and literacy in another language.

**Table 1:** Dual Language Approaches<sup>7</sup>

	Two-way immersion (TWI)	Developmental bilingual (DBE)	Transitional bilingual (TBE)
Language goals	Bilingualism and biliteracy	Bilingualism and biliteracy	English fluency
Cultural goals	Integrate into mainstream U.S. culture & maintain/appreciate ELs’ home culture	Integrate into mainstream U.S. culture & maintain/appreciate ELs’ home culture	Integrate into mainstream U.S. culture
Language/s of instruction	Primary language of ELs and English	Primary language of ELs and English	Primary language of ELs and English
Students	Both native and non-native (with same primary language) speakers of English	Non-native speakers of English with same primary language	Non-native speakers of English with same primary language
Grades served	K-12	Mainly elementary	Mainly elementary
Typical length of participation	5-12 years	5-12 years	2-4 years

Two-way immersion programs are a particular form of dual language education in which the non-English language is used for a significant portion of instruction. The fundamental goal of two-way immersion is that both English learner and English fluent students gain high levels of bilingualism, biliteracy, academic achievement, and cross-cultural knowledge and understanding. In order to achieve this, students begin two-way immersion in kindergarten or first grade, and continue the approach throughout their elementary school careers.

There are two variations of two-way immersion: the 50:50 and the 90:10 models. In the 90:10 model, kindergarteners and first graders receive 90% of their instruction in the partner (non-English) language, with

the remaining 10% in English. At each successive grade level, the percentage of English instructional time increases until Grades 4-6, when instruction is equally balanced between English and the partner language. In the 50:50 model, students receive half of their instruction in English and the other half in the partner language throughout elementary school (K-6).

In both models of two-way immersion, teachers must be bilingual and biliterate. They must also be skilled in strategies and techniques for delivering instruction in content and language to students who are not familiar with the language of instruction: to both EL students who are not familiar with English and to English fluent students who are not familiar with the partner language.

## Instruction in two-way immersion programs

Teachers in two-way immersion programs use a variety of techniques to communicate content and build language skills for students who have varying degrees of proficiency in the two languages. Among these are:

- Social interactions in instruction that are equitable between the two languages
- Reciprocal (interactive) rather than transmission (lecture) approaches
- Cooperative learning strategies that are well-planned and monitored to ensure interactions that enhance language development
- Slower, simplified and repetitive speech when students are at the early stages of proficiency
- Techniques to check and confirm comprehension
- Contextual clues and visual aides
- Gestures and modeling<sup>8</sup>

## Two-way immersion outcomes: bilingualism, biliteracy and gap-closing

Two-way immersion education has experienced a growth in interest over the last few years due largely to robust research findings that support its success in achieving bilingualism and biliteracy for all students and in helping EL students close achievement gaps. By the end of sixth grade, both English learner and English fluent students who participate in two-way immersion develop proficiency in English and the partner language, become biliterate in both languages, develop bicultural understanding, and achieve on par with or above their peers in other programs on standardized tests.

The emerging research on two-way immersion includes the gold standard of education research and analysis, large-scale longitudinal and comparative studies. Additional smaller scale studies of single or multiple classrooms also support positive outcomes of two-way immersion education. A number of earlier studies focused on French-English two-way immersion programs in Canada; more recent research is based on Spanish-English programs in California. All find similar strong student outcomes for two-way immersion.

A significant advantage of two-way immersion programs is that in addition to developing students' bilingual, biliteracy and bicultural skills, these programs

promote successful academic outcomes for both English learners and English fluent students. Moreover, English learner participants in two-way immersion programs achieve at higher levels than their English learner peers in other programs. A review of a number of U.S. studies concludes that in two-way immersion programs:<sup>9</sup>

- All students perform at or above grade level on standardized reading and math tests in English
- All students achieve at or above grade level in reading and math tests measured in the partner language
- EL students close the achievement gap with native-English speaking students by fifth grade

This same review of research finds that the success for students who participate in two-way immersion programs in elementary school persists through their secondary schooling: middle and high school students who participate in continuous dual language programs in K-6 have better outcomes than their peers in English mainstream programs. With regard to secondary education outcomes, these studies find that in two-way immersion:<sup>10</sup>

- All students were as or more likely to be enrolled in higher level math courses
- All students were as or more likely to pass the high school exit exam
- All students were less likely to drop out of school
- ELs were more likely to close achievement gaps with native-English speakers by the end of high school

Moreover, these positive outcomes are consistent for both models of two-way immersion (50:50 and 90:10). Although research indicates that in the early grades, English learners in 50:50 models exhibit higher scores in English than ELs in 90:10 models, these differences disappear by the upper elementary grades and students in both models have similarly positive and enduring achievement and English fluency outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it is of note, and somewhat counter-intuitive, that research on two-way immersion and other dual language approaches reveals that English learners who spend more school time studying English do not have

higher academic achievement or gain greater proficiency in English than their peers in dual language programs. Rather, the evidence is that EL students who spend more time developing advanced literacy skills in their first language, benefit in terms of developing greater proficiency in their second (English) and in improving their academic outcomes on English language achievement tests. In short, this research indicates that while all EL students need and benefit from English language development, those who also develop strong primary language skills through two-way immersion ultimately show greater proficiency in English and stronger academic achievement.

## Potential contributors to improved outcomes

Research identifies several factors associated with bilingualism and biliteracy that are likely contributors to the improved outcomes for all students who participate in dual immersion programs—both those who are English fluent and English learners—and to closing achievement gaps for EL students. These additional benefits of bilingualism include cognitive benefits to the brain, the ability to transfer knowledge across languages, and the positive impact of integration within the classroom.

### *Neurocognitive advantages of bilingualism*

Research suggests that advanced levels of bilingual competence have positive effects on cognition and brain activity. Such positive effects include advantages associated with problem-solving skills, memory skills, reading abilities, and the ability to think in science and math. Researchers surmise that the experience of controlling attention to two languages in order to keep them separate and use them appropriately is what enhances these abilities and skills in bilingual individuals. These advantages are most evident in bilingual people who acquire relatively advanced levels of proficiency in two languages and who use their two languages actively on a regular basis. Collectively, “these findings argue for bilingual education as cognitive enrichment, and, at the same time, argue for programs that provide substantive and continuous opportunities for students to develop bilingual competence in school so that they enjoy the cognitive advantages that high levels of bilingualism confer.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Transfer of knowledge and skills*

A number of studies have found that academic language skills developed in the first language form the foundation for the development of literacy skills in the second.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, one reason for the greater success of EL students in dual language immersion programs is likely associated with the opportunity it provides for students to build a strong foundation of first language skills. In addition, use of student’s primary language to convey difficult academic concepts before students have a level of proficiency to understand these concepts through instruction in English means that they can access complex information while their English skills are still emerging. This helps ensure that they do not fall behind in academic skills and understanding while they are building their English proficiency.

### *Benefits resulting from integration*

Integration of English learners and English fluent students plays an important role in EL students’ success and two-way immersion programs are specifically designed to ensure such integration. These programs are founded on a principle that “children will learn from each other and learn to respect each other if they are exposed to learning situations in which they have sustained contact of a basically positive nature and their social status is equalized.”<sup>14</sup> Another reason for the importance of this integration is that peers who provide strong English language models are an important contributor to EL students’ language development. Social interaction, not just on the playground but in learning contexts where students can use different types of language and be exposed to language that is beyond their current levels of language proficiency, is key to learning and to developing English language skills.<sup>15</sup> In addition, particularly for EL students who are new to the US, sharing classrooms with non-EL peers helps them learn the social norms of mainstream society and schools. Moreover, the integration of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in two-way immersion contributes to socializing young people toward a lifelong broader understanding and tolerance of California’s diverse population.

## Characteristics of quality programs

Achieving such successful outcomes as those documented above depends on a number of factors. It requires a clear understanding of the two-way immersion approach and what it entails as well as faithful and full

implementation. Perhaps most critically, given that effective teachers remain the in-school factor most associated with student success, it requires high quality bilingual and biliterate teachers who are familiar with the dual immersion model, theory, and instructional strategies. Teachers with Bilingual Cross Cultural Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) certification have the strong skills and training needed to teach effectively in two-way immersion—or any program for students who are not proficient in English. BCLAD teachers bring unique skills to their instructional practice, including the ability to use English and the students' primary language in ways that foster student comprehension. Research has identified some of the reasons that BCLAD teachers are able to promote the success of EL students:<sup>16</sup>

- Educators who are familiar with their students' culture and fluent in their language teach in ways that build on these student assets, which creates supportive relationships that result in more effective instruction.
- Teachers who are bilingual feel more comfortable communicating with parents of English learners, and thus are more likely to build and maintain important home-school connections.
- Bilingual credentialed educators express more positive attitudes about language and about teaching diverse students and feel more confident about their capacity to teach EL students. Both of these factors are associated with more effective instruction.

Other factors critical to the success of two-way immersion programs include:<sup>17</sup>

- Cohesive school-wide vision and planning and clearly defined goals for student achievement in dual immersion programs
- Effective, standards-aligned curricula that provide meaningful and challenging material in both languages
- An environment that welcomes, informs, and values parents from all backgrounds

## Challenges of two-way immersion programs

A significant challenge to two-way immersion programs is that philosophical differences and political controversy over the last decades have eclipsed research findings on the successful student outcomes of many programs that employ bilingual methods. In California, these differences led to a voter initiative, Proposition 227, which restricted the use of the primary language in the state's classrooms and made it much more difficult for parents of EL students to choose such programs for their children. Under Proposition 227, parents of English learners must petition if they wish to have their children in programs that include the primary language and if adequate numbers of EL parents do so, the school may decide to offer such programs.

The passage of Proposition 227 has led to a sharp decrease in the number of students in programs that include primary language instruction. In the 1997-98 school year, just before the Proposition was implemented, approximately 30% of EL students (409,879 out of 1,381,000) were in education programs that included some instruction in the students' primary language. After Proposition 227, that number continued to decrease. During the 2010-2011 school year (the most recent year for which data are available) just under 5% of EL students (71,809 out of 1,441,901) were in such programs.<sup>18</sup> The decline in the number of students enrolled in dual language programs has resulted in a commensurate drop in the number of teachers pursuing BCLAD training, which has led to a shortage of such highly qualified teachers. The number of educators completing these credentials decreased 37% between 1998 and 2008.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Well-implemented two-way immersion programs foster the academic success of English learners and their English fluent peers and help prepare students to compete in a globalized economy by providing them with bilingual, biliterate skills and cross-cultural understanding. As districts and schools look for ways to better prepare all students for the interconnected world of the twenty-first century, two-way immersion programs hold significant promise.

**AB 215 (2011)** created a State Seal of Biliteracy that recognizes high school graduates who have attained a high level of proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing in one or more languages in addition to English. The award can go to a student whose native language is English and acquires proficiency in a foreign language or to an English learner who is fluent in another language—and becomes proficient in English. More than 165 school districts currently offer the award.<sup>20</sup>

## Questions for board members

1. Who are the district's EL students (e.g. what languages do they speak? How long have they been in U.S. schools? In which grade levels are they?)
2. What does the board know and believe about two-way immersion programs?
3. What are the programs currently employed for English learners?
4. How successful are these programs at promoting EL achievement?
5. Can two-way immersion programs fit into the district's plan for raising the achievement of EL and non-EL students in the district?

## Endnotes

- 1 Data downloaded from CDE Dataquest May 6, 2014 <http://bit.ly/We1DMB>
- 2 Data downloaded from CDE Dataquest January 29, 2014 <http://bit.ly/1i6Tlap>
- 3 Percentages extrapolated from data on enrollment numbers downloaded from California Department of Education Dataquest January 29, 2014 at <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>
- 4 Olsen, L. (2010). *Reparable harm: Fulfilling the unkept promise of educational opportunity for California's long term English Learners*. Californians Together. Available online at [www.californianstogether.org](http://www.californianstogether.org)
- 5 California School Boards Association. (2014). *English Learners in Focus Issue 1: Demographic and Achievement Profile of California's English learners*. Online at: <http://bit.ly/1wpCNK8>
- 6 Callahan, R. M. (2013). *The English Learner dropout dilemma: Multiple risks and multiple resources*. California Drop out Research Project. Available online at [www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs\\_reports.htm](http://www.cdrp.ucsb.edu/pubs_reports.htm)

- 7 Lindholm-Leary, K., Genesee, F. (2010). Alternative educational programs for English Learners. In *Improving Education for English Learners: Research Based Approaches* (p. 329). Sacramento: California Department of Education.
- 8 Howard, E. R., Sugarman, J., Christian, D., Lindholm-Leary, K. J., & Rogers, D. (2007). *Guiding principles for dual language education* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics (pp. 12-14).
- 9 Lindholm-Leary, K. (2012) Success and challenges in dual language education. (p. 257).
- 10 Lindholm-Leary, K. (2012). (See endnote 9; pp. 257-258)
- 11 Lindholm-Leary, K., Genesee, F. (2010). (See endnote 7; pp. 350-351)
- 12 Lindholm-Leary, K., Genesee, F. (2010). (See endnote 7; pp. 325).
- 13 August, D., & Shanahan, T. (2006). *Developing literacy in second-language learners. Report of the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 14 Gándara, P. and Orfield, G. (2010). *A return to the "Mexican room": The segregation of Arizona's English learners* (p. 19). The Civil Rights Project, UCLA. Available online at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED511322.pdf>
- 15 Ellis, R. (2005). Principles of instructed language learning. *System*, 33, 209-224.
- 16 Hopkins, M. (2013). Building on our teaching assets: The unique pedagogical contributions of bilingual educators. *Bilingual Research Journal: The Journal of the National Association for Bilingual Education*, 36 (3), 350-370.
- 17 Lindholm-Leary, K. (2005). The rich promise of two-way immersion. *Educational Leadership* (pp. 56-58).
- 18 Data downloaded on 5-23-14 from CDE Dataquest <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>
- 19 Gándara, P., & Orfield, G. (2010). Moving from failure to a new vision of language policy. In Gándara, P. & Hopkins, M. (Eds.), *Forbidden Language: English Learners and Restrictive Language Policy* (pp. 216–226). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- 20 For more information on the California State Seal of Biliteracy visit: [www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/sealofbiliteracy.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/sealofbiliteracy.asp)

## Further reading

*Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches* (2010). California Department of Education (Ed.). Sacramento: California Department of Education Press.

Goldenberg, C. and Coleman, R. (2010). *Promoting Academic Achievement among English Learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.