



# The Outstanding Opportunities, but Persistent Challenges, of Dual Language Education

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As highlighted in the Cambio Center's November 2015 e-brief<sup>1</sup>, dual language (DL) education programs are growing exponentially<sup>2</sup> in the United States. (See the latest report from the Department of Education<sup>3</sup>.) By some accounts, these programs – especially two-way immersion models that integrate students from two different language backgrounds and use both languages in the classroom – are the “astounding” answer<sup>4</sup> to desegregating our schools, preparing children for a transnational world, and developing smarter thinkers.

However, scholars like Nelson Flores<sup>5</sup> remind us that the politics of language education and history of racism in U.S. schools make it very difficult to realize the “rich promise”<sup>6</sup> of DL education for all students, especially those from minoritized groups. This e-brief will review research that documents the outstanding opportunities that DL programs provide, as well as introduce some of their persistent challenges.

### The Dual Language Promise

Dual language education programs use at least two different languages during regular instruction of core subject areas like math, reading, social studies, and science. Such programs typically begin in kindergarten and have three goals: (1) the development of bilingualism and biliteracy, (2) high academic achievement, and (3) cross-cultural competency. A popular DL model called “two-way immersion” (TWI) integrates students from two different language groups (for example, native English and native Spanish speakers) in the same classroom.

Scholars theorize that DL education results in strong academic outcomes because developing bilingualism likewise develops a range of skill sets that are important for learning (see Figure 1). For instance, Ellen Bialystok<sup>7</sup> and colleagues have demonstrated the positive links<sup>8</sup> between bilingualism, cognitive development, and students' advanced understanding of language<sup>9</sup>. Others have studied

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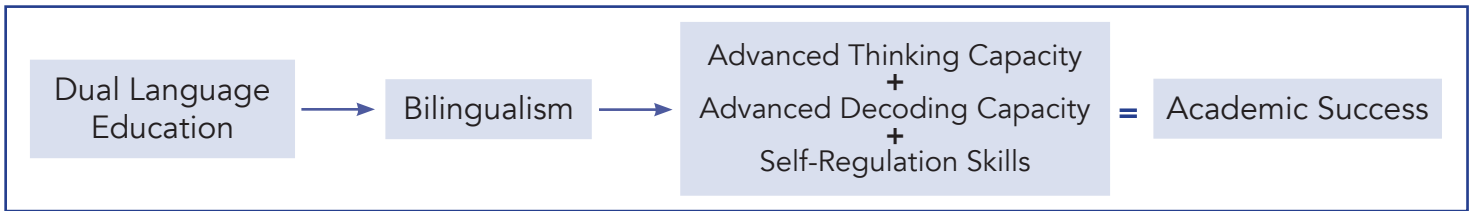
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**Figure 1: The Dual Language Equation for Academic Success**



the positive effects that come from integrating students<sup>10</sup> across different linguistic, immigrant, and socio-economic backgrounds, as purposefully done in TWI models.

In turn, studies have examined the links between DL programs and academic achievement as measured by standardized test scores. Most recently, through a natural “randomized experiment,” researchers in Oregon<sup>11</sup> compared the results of different kinds of DL programs and regular educational programming in Portland Public Schools. This experiment included program models that provided instruction in Japanese, Mandarin, Spanish and Russian. Among other positive results, they found that DL students’ reading achievement scores in fifth and eighth grades were higher than their peers’ who attended regular English-only programs. This is one of the most convincing and well-designed studies of DL academic achievement to date, confirming that there is a relationship between dual language education and academic success. Although most studies do not have such strong research designs as Oregon’s, there is a growing and substantial body of research<sup>12</sup> that demonstrates positive outcomes for DL students (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Comparing Spanish-English DL Models to Other Programs (Lindholm-Leary<sup>6</sup>, 2001)**

<i>Outcomes for Spanish-speaking students:</i>		
Program:	Two-way Immersion (TWI)	Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE)
<b>Factors:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spanish-speaking students are integrated with native English-speaking peers.</li> <li>Teachers provide content and literacy instruction in both Spanish and English.</li> <li>Programs focus on maintaining students’ home language in addition to learning another language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spanish-speaking students are segregated from native English-speaking peers.</li> <li>Initially, teachers provide instruction in Spanish, and then eventually, they transition to only English.</li> <li>Programs focus on English development rather than Spanish.</li> </ul>
<b>Results:</b>	Spanish-speaking students in TWI outperformed TBE students on English tests by Grade 6.	
<i>Outcomes for English-speaking students:</i>		
Program:	Two-way Immersion (TWI) Program	Traditional Education Programs
<b>Factors:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English-speaking students are integrated with native Spanish-speaking peers.</li> <li>Teachers provide content and literacy instruction in both Spanish and English.</li> <li>Programs focus on maintaining students’ home language in addition to learning another language.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English-speaking students may be segregated from native Spanish-speaking peers who receive services for English language development.</li> <li>Programs focus on developing students’ English capabilities with minimal foreign-language exposure until high school.</li> </ul>
<b>Results:</b>	English-speaking TWI students outperformed peers in English-only, general education programs by about 10 points on California assessments of reading and math.	

The findings in Figure 2, which demonstrate the positive results of TWI education for Spanish speakers, are especially remarkable, because in both TWI and transitional bilingual programs, they were initially taught in their home language of Spanish. So why have TWI programs had better outcomes? In transitional programs – unlike TWI – over time, students receive increasing amounts

of English and decreasing attention to developing their academic capacity in Spanish. Transitional bilingual students are also segregated from native English-speaking peers. Theories suggest that TWI's focus on maintaining students' home language, as well as integrating them with English-speaking students, supports Spanish speakers' pathways to fluent bilingualism and greater academic success.

Research on DL programs in other contexts suggests similar positive outcomes for many students, from one-way immersion programs in Canada<sup>13</sup> to French immersion programs in the southern U.S.<sup>14</sup>, which include many African-American children. In general, however, more longitudinal research and studies that control for "selection effects" are necessary to make sure that we are confirming a positive link between high academic outcomes and DL programs. Specifically, the majority of DL research has not yet examined whether students who already have higher academic abilities or whose families have greater resources are the ones that choose DL programs. In turn, it may be that such prior experiences are shaping their academic and linguistic success, not the DL programs themselves. That's why we need more longitudinal and experimental designs, such as the Oregon study described earlier.

## Persistent Challenges

Despite the growing evidence that DL education can provide outstanding opportunities for children, well-implemented programs—with intentional planning, teaching, assessing, and collaborating—are difficult to create<sup>15</sup>, as discussed by researchers such as Claudia Cervantes-Soon<sup>16</sup>, Deb Palmer<sup>17</sup> and myself (see Lisa Dorner<sup>18</sup>). We have recently worked with colleagues to review research on the experiences of minoritized children in two-way immersion programs, findings which will be published in the *Review of Research in Education* in 2017. Among other conclusions, we found that there are persistent inequalities in many areas of TWI. Here is a brief review of the major areas of concern:

- 1. Student access and experiences:** Not all children have equal access to DL programs. For instance, DL schools may be located in higher income or racially homogenous neighborhoods, making it more difficult for children from other areas to attend.
- 2. Classroom practices, curriculum, and linguistic choices:** Within DL classrooms, the experiences and languages of minoritized children are not recognized or rewarded to the degree of their White, English-speaking peers. In many districts, teachers do not have access to high-quality, authentic curricula in the schools' various languages (e.g., Spanish or Mandarin).
- 3. Teachers' preparation, background, and orientations:** Many states and school districts do not have certification or effective training for DL teachers.
- 4. Parents and community engagement:** Despite attempts to integrate families and children from different racial, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, minoritized families report feeling marginalized at their children's DL schools. Many districts lack structures to equitably engage all of their families.
- 5. District and state-level policies, economic contexts, and politics:** The pressures of accountability require testing with a focus on English development, rather than fully appreciating, preparing, and assessing students' bilingualism. The politics and traditions of "English-only" movements, and negative discourse about immigration and immigrants, make it difficult to develop school contexts that fully appreciate and develop multiple languages and cultural orientations in our children.

### Why the term "Minoritized?"

This e-brief sometimes uses the word "minoritized." I do this when referring to groups that have often been called "minority" in reference to dominant cultural groups, such as students who speak a minority language (i.e., language other than English in the U.S. context) or come from a minority background (e.g., someone who identifies as Black/African American). Using this term, however, suggests that the referenced group of people is somehow smaller, less than, or subordinate<sup>19</sup>. By using the word minoritized instead, I aim to highlight that others have placed this suggestion upon certain groups, who are by no means "minor."

## Moving Forward

In summary, future research needs to continue examining DL education and how it could become a truly “astounding” success for all, across all contexts:

1. Empirically, we need longitudinal research on DL student achievement that examines how different program components lead to outcomes for diverse sets of students over time.
2. Theoretically, we need to better understand the links between bilingualism and children’s academic and linguistic experiences.
3. Politically, we need to question whether DL programs are meeting their goals for all youth, and understand how DL programs are implemented in a variety of diverse contexts, like those found in Missouri. We welcome you to join this work!

## Resources and References

Cambio Center – [www.cambio.missouri.edu](http://www.cambio.missouri.edu)  
Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition,  
University of Minnesota – <http://carla.umn.edu>  
Center for Applied Linguistics – [www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)

Dual Language Education of New Mexico –  
[www.dlenm.org](http://www.dlenm.org)  
Missouri Dual Language Network – [www.modlan.org](http://www.modlan.org)  
Seal of Biliteracy – <http://sealofbiliteracy.org>

## Footnotes

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**Lisa M. Dorner, Ph.D.** is an Associate Professor of Educational Policy at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her research has focused on language policy and planning in education, educational policy implementation, and immigrant family integration in “new” spaces. In 2014, she co-founded the [Missouri Dual Language Network](http://www.modlan.org) (MODLAN) to encourage and support multilingual education across Missouri. Dorner loves teaching, reading, and traveling with her friends and family.