



# What is Dual Language Education?

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Recently, the U.S. Congress made a bipartisan request for a [national commission](#) to study the state of language education in the United States. After an era of declining availability of foreign language education for the general public and fewer bilingual programs for children from immigrant families, this kind of request may mark an important shift in thinking about the importance of multilingualism and related education initiatives.

This changing discourse is coming not only from our leaders, but also from local policymakers and community members. From [Delaware](#) to [North Carolina](#) to [Utah](#), there has been exponential growth of dual language (DL) education programs since the 1990s. *But what exactly are dual language programs? And what are the promises and possibilities of this unique model of education?* This Cambio eBrief will focus on defining DL programs and who they serve, and a subsequent brief will focus on the promises and possibilities of dual language education.

### Who Do Dual Language Programs Serve?

Dual language education can refer to a variety of programs and practices. Most broadly, DL programs use two different languages for instruction of core subjects like math, reading, social studies, and science. Such programs have three ultimate goals: (a) the development of bilingualism and biliteracy, (b) high academic achievement, and (c) cross-cultural competency. While the most recent explosion of new programs is in elementary schools, with classes starting in kindergarten, dual language models also exist at the middle and high school levels.

The common models are called “two-way” and “one-way” immersion, but there are also “heritage” and “developmental bilingual” programs. Each model serves a different group of students:

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- **Two-way immersion models** instruct roughly equal numbers of students from two different language backgrounds. For example, a new program in [Carthage](#), Missouri, mixes approximately 50% native English speakers and 50% native Spanish speakers. The students spend half their day studying some of their subjects in English and half of their day with another teacher, studying other subjects in Spanish.
- **One-way immersion models** are typically designed for students from the same language background to acquire a new, foreign language. For example, the [St. Louis Language Immersion Schools](#) serve nearly 90% native English speakers who study their school subjects in either Spanish, French, or Mandarin. [Académie Lafayette](#) in Kansas City serves nearly 100% native English speakers and provides content education in French.
- **Developmental bilingual education** is similar to one-way immersion, but these students are usually from immigrant or migrant families, and so they come to school speaking a language other than English. In the U.S., then, this model aims to continue developing students' native or home language as well as English. Spanish-English developmental bilingual programs are common in Texas.
- **Heritage language programs** are also similar to one-way immersion, but they serve students from the same linguistic and cultural background, who usually only speak English, rather than their families' heritage language. The unique goal of such programs is to revitalize a family or cultural language. Examples include native Hawaiian programs.

### Commonly Used Terms for Students in Dual Language Programs

Students who grow up speaking languages other than English due to their family's background or migration experiences are labeled "**English Learners**" or "**English Language Learners**" when they start school. They usually take a test to determine how much academic English they know, and if the school determines that they need assistance, they must attend a specialized program.

In Missouri, most "English Learners" attend "English as a Second Language" (ESL) courses, which aim to transition them to English-only classrooms as soon as possible. This instructional approach usually discourages students from using or developing their native language.

**Native English speakers** in the United States grow up in families where the primary or parental language is English. For these students, dual language programs provide a unique opportunity to become bilingual and bicultural at an early age.

Bilingual school experiences are very different from what most U.S. students encounter, specifically, foreign language courses in middle or high school that focus on teaching grammar and reading in that language. Foreign language classes like these do not teach content material, such as math or science, in another language, and thus native English speakers rarely have the opportunity to develop academic fluency in another language.

Unlike the typical approaches for language learning designed for either "English Learners" or "native English speakers," dual language programs serve multiple groups of students, **intentionally developing and maintaining students' capacity in two languages**. We believe that students in such programs should be named by the languages (and resources) that they bring to school—for example, "native Spanish speakers" and "native English speakers"—rather than what schools think they are lacking.



## How Do Dual Language Programs Work?

Dual language programs vary in the amount of time students spend learning in each language. The most common approaches are “90:10” and “50:50.” A 90:10 program has 90% of instruction in the immersion language (e.g., Spanish) and 10% in the area’s dominant language (e.g., English). The 90:10 approaches are common in elementary one-way immersion and developmental bilingual models, which often employ one fully bilingual individual as the lead classroom teacher. Meanwhile, in the 50:50 approach, students spend 50% of their time in each language. In these cases, schools often implement a “two-teacher” model, where each teacher specializes in one language.

No matter the approach, all dual language programs strive to create authentic language learning environments, where students must use the immersion language during the school day. Young children, then, are regularly exposed to a second language, at the same time as they study the material expected of their grade level.

The next Cambio eBrief will review what the research finds about whether dual language programs are meeting their important goals of bilingualism, biliteracy, high academic achievement, and cross-cultural competency!

### References

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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](https://www.facebook.com/moduallanguage) (MODLAN) to encourage and support multilingual education across Missouri. Dorner loves teaching, reading, and traveling with her friends and family.